

It sounds as if Coalville has lost a good magistrate through the resignation of Adoline Smith. She was suspended from duty for saying that all burglars should be given a minimum six-month jail sentence.

The area's MP David Taylor who served as a JP alongside Smith in Coalville for ten years describes her as "very experienced, scrupulously fair, knowledgeable, and a considerate colleague."

About the only thing missing from that list is the "wisdom of Solomon" and Smith did show a momentary lack of judgement in her remarks - made following a burglary at her home. Her resignation is a shame because our courts wouldn't function without people willing to give up their time to perform a thankless task, but Smith did have to go. The bench is the place for enforcing the law, not changing it. Justice demands that magistrates apply the law as equally as possible. However, a lot of people will agree with her remarks, although I'm not one of them. Prison satisfies people's desire for revenge, but it only makes our homes safer for the few months the criminal is inside. Going to prison is like attending a lawbreaker's trade convention. After a couple of months, offenders come out having done a refresher course in successfully committing crime.

We need to stop them committing more offences and, as I wrote in last week's column, fixing people up with employment works. I want to point out that I missed a sentence out in last week's column: I wouldn't have prisoners working in places with vulnerable people in them such as hospitals, but there are plenty of labour shortages that they could help to fill.

The other factor that stops people committing crime is the thought that they are likely to get caught. However, even if someone has been "caught" and charged with a crime, punishment is still a long way off. Leicestershire has an astonishing 1,000 people in it who have failed to appear at court and have got away with it. Two hundred of these people are charged with crimes such as burglary and assault, yet are continuing their lives as if nothing ever happened - unlike their victims.

Leicestershire and Rutland is not unique in this appalling situation. Nationally one in eight people on bail fail to turn up, turning our criminal justice system into a joke. I don't blame the police, although the burden falls on them to sort themess out and a crackdown was announced last week. But what happens after the crackdown ends? They are already facing extra work if 24-hour drinking comes in.

I experienced a nightlife free from the drinking up times when I lived in Spain. There people didn't neck down pints to meet a deadline, but then people didn't neck down pints at all. It simply wasn't seen as cool to get hammered and that's the problem with introducing 24-hours drinking here. We have a culture that accepts binge-drinking. People have more money than ever to spend on drink and other drugs and soon they will have 24 hours in which to spend, spew and fight.