

hospital regimes that isolated those dying of HIV in locked wards – but there is little hint of the wider perspective. This is perhaps the show’s main flaw. The result is that there is little education around the toxic environment towards homosexuality that was openly encouraged by Thatcher, culminating in the punitive regime under Clause 28. A nod to the dangers of a government promoting intolerance and bigotry might, perhaps, have been timely.



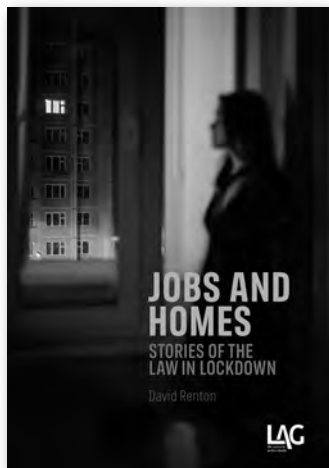
None of these omissions detract from the piercing writing, the devastating subject matter. It simply means that there is sometimes a lack of depth to the (almost universally) homophobic attitudes of the parents to the group, the vehemence behind their prejudices. It may be hard for some viewers fully to comprehend the depth to which shame was expected, and often forcibly demanded, from the gay community. Despite that, *It’s a Sin* stands on its own, powerfully. **Lyndsey Sambrooks-Wright**

Arming us with clarity in the struggle for a fairer Britain

Jobs and Homes David Renton, published by the Legal Action Group, April 2021, £20 print & ebook, www.lag.org.uk/bookshop

David Renton’s book is an exploration of the state of the law during England’s coronavirus lockdown. Renton is a committed socialist and a prolific writer on social history, law and workers’ movements; he is also a barrister specialising in discrimination, employment and housing law for workers and tenants. As such, he’s in a perfect position to consider how the Covid-19 pandemic has affected the delivery of justice in two major areas of struggle: jobs and homes.

Renton weaves together three narratives: reflections on his personal experiences of Covid-19’s effects as the pandemic progressed, introductory information and analysis of the legal system, and anecdotes and case studies from his experience as a barrister. The personal commentary and insightful political analysis help to keep the tone light and accessible between detailed and deeply affecting stories from people who Renton has represented in recent years.



In one case study, a woman who was living in council housing with her children took in her elderly and unwell mother after she had suffered domestic violence. The property in which the family were living had neither a bath nor a shower on the ground floor, which meant basic hygiene facilities were inaccessible for her mother, who had nowhere else to live. It took repeat threats from a solicitor for the council to consider alternative housing for the family, plus evidence from external sources such as a GP and

even the local authority’s own third-party advisors. When they finally reassessed the family’s housing situation, the local authorities’ housing officers argued that it was, as Renton puts it, ‘not unreasonable to expect a 76-year-old woman to sleep each night for a year on a sofa. If her mother had difficulty washing, she should not complain since there were “facilities” on the ground floor level (i.e. a sink) and she could wash herself there.’ It took until the day before the hearing for the council to give in and finally offer to move the family.

This story will not be surprising to legal aid solicitors and caseworkers, but it is no less affecting for being so similar to other injustices faced by tenants

‘For a lawyer so concerned with justice for his clients this is a reminder of the limitations of focusing solely on legal approaches to social justice.’

in council and social housing. In fact, to me it felt galvanising – a reminder of the hard work going on synchronously across the legal system to try and achieve justice for people who have been systematically disadvantaged and disempowered. But the book also describes many losses and frustrations. Renton reminds us of the processes that are set against our work, including the historic reshaping of employment practices and the housing sector that has taken place over the last 40 years – as well, of course, as lawyers and decision-makers within the legal sector who have a very different vision to us of how the system should look.

Jobs and Homes peeks, Secret Barrister-esque, into the interpersonal politics and micro-injustices of courtrooms: the way pre-existing friendships between judges and barristers can change things in your favour or against you; how time limitations and silly administrative mistakes can affect how a case plays out. For a lawyer so concerned with justice for his clients – and for all of us with wider socialist commitments – this is a reminder of the limitations of focusing solely on legal approaches to social justice.

In a very helpful section towards the end of the book, Renton considers how courtroom dynamics may change as more hearings move online. Due to post-2008 budget cuts and wider neoliberal trends, the direction of travel has been digital even >>>

Thousands protested in March and April for women's safety and against the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill.

>>> before the Covid-19 pandemic. Renton points out that between 2010 and 2019, the state had already sold off 'half of our magistrates courts, a third of our country courts and three quarters of our tribunals'. But the shift to online hearings has been turbocharged in the last year due to long periods where courts could not open. Renton raises a plethora of concerns with the direction of travel and this year's contribution to the problem. He writes: 'Studies have shown that when a court system is moved online, judges make different decisions. For example, one report on bail applications in immigration cases heard by video link in 2011 and 2013, found that a mere 50 per cent of remote applications were granted bail, a significant reduction from the 78 per cent success rate when bail applications were made in person.'

I came away from reading this (and further evidence he provides suggesting similar trends) horrified by the arbitrariness of judges' power and reminded of the role of empathy in legal contexts. Justice by algorithm, 'on the paper' decisions and online hearings where clients are 'muted' by the usher, drain the humanity out of a system that is already too often inhumane. As Renton argues powerfully: 'In the absence of a chance to persuade a Judge face to face, all that remains is people with power finding excuses to ignore those without.'

The book would serve as an excellent primer for both activists and young lawyers seeking to arm themselves with arguments in favour of widening access to justice. It would also be useful in the housing and trade union movements as a glimpse into the injustices of the justice system for workers and tenants. For seasoned legal professionals, the book may tell you many things you already know, but the valuable case studies and the interesting political reflections Renton considers along the way make it well worth reading.

Clare Bradley



Picture: Jess Hurd / reportdigital.co.uk

Handbook equips us to support those who stand up to the state

The Protest Handbook Second edition to the 2nd edition of the Protest Handbook, co-written by Tom Wainwright, Anna Morris, Owen Greenhall and Lochlinn Parker

'A short-lived disruption to your life is a small price to pay to avoid much longer lasting and damaging crises'. These words by Caroline Lucas MP in the foreword provides a backdrop as to why this book is needed. Succinctly and powerfully, she describes how civil disobedience has been utilised to bring about positive, social change.

At the time of writing, the dangerously authoritarian Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill has been delayed because of protests led by groups such as Sisters Uncut. If not for these protests bringing wider attention to the government's attempts to rush this Bill through Parliament – without effective scrutiny of its provisions designed to curb our



right to protest, increase police powers, introduce tougher sentencing, and further criminalise already marginalised groups such as those identifying as Gypsy, Roma and Travellers – we may have been in a very

different and concerning position.

Undoubtedly, the government's latest attack on protest is in direct response to those who caused widescale disruption and sparked national conversation as part of Extinction Rebellion in 2019 and the Black Lives Matter resurgence in 2020. As the government has used the coronavirus pandemic as a mask to severely curtail rights to expression and assembly, the release of the Protest Handbook's second edition is timely.

In the eight years since the first edition, there have been some victories for protest rights, including the recent ruling in favour of the Stanstead 15 in *R v Thacker and Others* where the Court of Appeal held that the group of activists should 'not have been prosecuted' for an 'extremely serious' terror-related offence. However, there have also been some worrying developments such as the High Court's decision in