

Diogenes on law

olidomide affair appeared to high-
problem of the law's delays. The
was ten years past; and compen-
sated belated. Yet in that instance
ys were more apparent than real,
y the law's substance, rather than
ystem. The parents had been pro-
vised that, because of the difficul-
proving that Distillers fell short of
able standard of care in the then
scientific knowledge, it was far
ertain that a child had any right to
for harm done to it while un-
lence the reluctance to prosecute
m and the reliance on a painful
of settlement.

iden v Ashby the court of appeal
cerned with the following facts. An
took place at Boundstone Secon-
odern School, Lancing on 21 June
e plaintiff was a boy of 13. The
nt was a prefect of 17. There was
e. The plaintiff was injured. His
s cut. He had to have stitches. The
s case was that this was an attack
known bully, whom the school
never have appointed to a position
y. The defendant's case was that
ntiff was aggressive and truculent;
ndant had acted in self-defence.
fter before legal action was written
anuary 1967. The writ was not
ntil April 1968. In February 1972,
usual pre-trial process having taken
e case should have been set down
ists for trial. But the plaintiff's soli-
id nothing. So the defendant's soli-
plied in March 1973 to have the
dismissed, for want of prosecution.
aw does not allow the threat of liti-
to hang indefinitely over persons.
onal injury cases, proceedings must
ted within three years—the limita-
ion. And the various stages of pre-
cess must, according to the rules
Supreme Court, be traversed with
on.

ver, in 1968, the court of appeal,
exercise of its inherent jurisdiction
rol procedure, decided to tighten
up. It held, in *Allen v Sir Alfred
ne and Sons Limited*, that an action
be dismissed for want of prosecution
had been disobedience to a peremp-
tor of the court, or if there had
ordinate and inexcusable delay on
t of the plaintiff and his lawyers.
ersonal injury cases especially, delay
rious matter. Split-second incidents
d enough to recall 24 hours later,
e (as in this case) after eight years.
urt of appeal felt obliged to dismiss
ion. Was this the lawyers' fault?
mitted to inadvertence. In some
n any event, the plaintiff will have
against his solicitors. But even if
not have such a claim, the princi-
ple. The *Allen v Sir Alfred Mc-*
principle works hardship on indivi-
but in general it is a fair ruling.

Findings

Adolescent violence

Over a six month period, the average teen-
age boy in London commits about 250 acts
of violence. One boy in twelve, during this
period, will have cut someone with a knife,
razor or glass; and more than three quar-
ters say they would be prepared to use such
weapons "in self-defence."

This information comes from a survey
carried out last year by William A. Belson
and colleagues in the London School of
Economics Survey Research Centre, using
a representative sample of 1,565 London
boys, aged twelve to 17. This survey formed
part of a wider study of the effects of long-
term exposure to television violence upon
adolescent boys, supported by a grant from
the Columbia Broadcasting System.

The full report of this project should be
available by the end of the year. The team's
findings on the nature and extent of vio-
lence are serious enough in their own right,
however, to be considered separately.

Table one shows the 258 acts of violence
the average adolescent committed, by
degree of violence. As can be seen, there is
a very sharp drop beyond the category of
"fairly violent." There is nothing to be
complacent about here, however, for while
the first category ("only very slightly vio-
lent") is made up of acts that are a kind of
tough mischief, the third category ("fairly
violent") is principally made up of violence
of a deliberately damaging and anti-social
kind (for example, smashing bottles or win-
dows).

Furthermore, though the averages for the
remaining three categories are low by com-
parison, they are averages, and leave room
for a considerable amount of violence of
this serious kind on the part of individual
boys. In fact, at the "quite" or "very" or
"extremely violent" levels, over half the
London boys had done nothing at all, while
the most violent 12 per cent of them
account for 80 per cent of all acts of this
kind.

The boys who engage in this more serious
kind of violence are disproportionately
drawn from certain categories. Notable
among these are boys whose fathers are in
the less skilled occupational groups; boys
who engage in stealing; boys who play tru-
ant from school; boys who dislike school;
boys from large households and boys attend-
ing secondary modern schools.

The team found it interesting that col-
oured boys tended to be under-represented
among those who engage in serious violence,
and also among those who do not engage in
violence at all. But they tend to be over-
represented in the middle ranges.

Other characteristics associated with seri-
ous violence are impulsiveness (acting first,
thinking after); having parents who go out

a lot together; losing temper easily when
small; being teased and hurt a lot when
small; and physical strength. However, these
various linkages with violence are only
trends. Violence of the serious kind is pre-
sent to an appreciable degree in *all* social
sectors.

Table two indicates the prevalence of
particular kinds of violence. It provides an
interesting contrast with table three, which
shows the extent to which boys say they
would commit one of the more serious
kinds of violence in particular circumstances
—in this case, stabbing someone with a
knife or other sharp weapon.

Similar tables for all the main kinds
of violence seen regularly on television pro-
duced similar results (though a causal con-
nection should not be assumed, says the
research team).

In all such tables, there was a sharp de-
cline, after the first four categories, in the
number of boys willing to commit the act
concerned. But, at the same time, there is
evidence of a hard core of boys who say
they are prepared to commit quite violent
acts for relatively minor reasons. Thus 5
per cent said they would be willing to stab
someone if "very angry" with him, 3 per
cent to shoot someone if "insulted," 2 per
cent to shoot someone if "in a bad mood."

How seriously are these statements of
"willingness" to be taken? It is improbable
that they mean a definite intention to act.
They may, rather, be evidence of reduced
inhibition—a form of permissiveness.

In this connection, it is worth noting that

**Table one: Violent actions by degree
of violence**

only very slightly violent	148
a bit violent	68
fairly violent	36
quite violent	4
very violent	2
extremely violent	0.01
total (in six month period)	258

**Table two: Specific acts committed by
boys**

	%*
cutting someone with knife, razor, glass	8
damaging train	8
damaging someone's car	11
giving someone a head butt	28
beating someone up	33
rudeness to people in authority	55
swearing at someone	90
*per cent of boys committing act	

**Table three: How many would stab
another person**

	%
if life threatened	78
in self-defence	76
to protect someone	59
if other were enemy of country	41
if very angry with someone	5
if girl insulted	8
if insulted oneself	3
if in a bad mood	2
for fun	—
if bored	—

even adult Londoners were found to differ
sharply in terms of what they regarded as
serious violence. "I broke open a parking
meter" was placed by them in every cate-
gory from "not the least bit violent" (5 per
cent), right up to "extremely violent" (2 per
cent). Even "deliberately cutting someone
with a razor" was rated by 5 per cent as
only "fairly" violent, and by 12 per cent
as no more than "quite" violent.

The team also plotted the boys' views on
several matters, of relevance to violence, on
attitude scales—notably, where they stood
on respect for authority, on "using violence
as a way to solve one's problems," and on
the pleasure they, personally, get from
violent action.

Only 28 per cent, in fact, totally ruled out
the use of violence as acceptable behaviour.
On the other hand, they found a tendency
to limit it, as a method of solving problems,
to circumstances involving self-defence, or
the defence of others. But 6 per cent
thought it "ok" to use violence "to get
what you want."

There was a fairly marked tendency to
express respect for authority of various
kinds; though a small minority, here too,
showed extreme disrespect. Boys tended to
regard violence as "intrinsic to human
nature," but stopped short at the notion
that people were "savages under the skin."
And while the majority found pleasure in
observing violence, and a few in taking part
in even quite hurtful violence, most disliked
being personally involved.

In general, Belson concludes, London
boys seem to commit a great deal of vio-
lence of one kind or another. Most boys are
involved in this to some degree. Moreover,
while the frequency of committing really
serious acts of violence seems to be restric-
ted to a minority of about 12 per cent, that
minority remains a substantial one. It is
supported by widespread tolerance for
minor acts of violence, found even among
those who would not themselves commit a
more serious act of violence.

Mothers alone

Studies of mother-infant separation usually
focus on its effects upon the child. A group
of psychologists at Stanford University—
Marjorie Seashore, Aimee Leifer, Clifford
Barnett and Herbert Leiderman—have now
explored how a mother reacts, when she has
to go home alone, leaving her new-born
child in a hospital's intensive care unit
(*Journal of Personality and Social Psy-
chology*, vol 26, No. 3, page 369).

Two groups of mothers with premature,
but otherwise normal, babies were studied.
Both groups contained first-time mothers
and mothers of other children. One group,
containing 21 mothers, had been dis-
charged from a hospital, which only allowed
them to see their babies through an ob-
servation window, during the three to
twelve weeks that they remained inside the
unit.

However, the hospital used by the second
group, which consisted of 22 mothers, en-

couraged them to come in and look after
the babies themselves.

At intervals, the mothers were given
questionnaires and interviews, from which
their confidence in themselves as mothers,
and the affection they felt towards their
babies, could be assessed. All mothers were
observed actually caring for their babies,
when they were finally discharged from the
hospital.

The assessments showed that early sepa-
ration seriously reduced the mother's
confidence. This was especially marked if
it was their first child. They also tended
to be less warm and attentive towards the
child, though only for a short while, when
they were finally left alone together. They
were far less likely to play with their
babies, and talk to them, for example,
during this stretch.

The authors do not find this surprising.
As they point out, a woman is ready for
motherhood, both physically and psycho-
logically, when she gives birth to a child.
If anything disrupts the natural progres-
sion from birth to care, this readiness is
quite likely to decline. The mother adjusts
to a situation without a baby. It is then
much harder for her to readjust to a car-
ing role. They strongly condemn hospitals
which exclude mothers in this way.

Incredible news

In recent years, the quality of American
television news coverage has come increas-
ingly under attack. A common charge is
that major issues are being slanted, accord-
ing to the political opinions of those who
run the news programmes. Mark Zanna and
Steven Del Vecchio, of Princeton Uni-
versity, wondered, rather, whether people
are finding the news so unpleasant in the
United States today that they want an ex-
cuse for refusing to believe what it tells
them.

They decided to test this by exploring
whether people find news more credible
when it seems to be presented from the
political standpoint they favour themselves
(*European Journal of Social Psychology*,
vol 3, No. 2, page 213).

Their subjects were every third resident
in two suburban New Jersey flat develop-
ments: a relatively young group (average
age, 29), fairly well educated, middle class
in income, and politically moderate. They
averaged 3.35 on a five point scale which
went from extreme conservatism (a score
of one) to extreme liberalism (a score of
five).

They were asked, first, where they stood
on five major controversial issues: the
Attica prison riot, My Lai, the Kent State
killings, law and order, and President Nix-
on's integrity. This part of the questionnaire
took the form of statements, to which sub-
jects could make six possible responses, in-
dicating degree of agreement or disagree-
ment. The statement about Nixon read:
"The majority of the criticism directed at
President Nixon is ill-founded; on the whole
he is an excellent president." Then they were

asked how they thought these issues had
been treated in TV news coverage; and how
credible they found coverage of each issue.

People were very consistent in their views.
For example, those who took a conservative
line on the Attica riot (ie, by justifying
police actions) tended to worry about law
and order, and focus on the "on the whole"
part of the statement about Nixon. This
simplified the authors' task, for they were
left, as a result, with only three indices to
work with—political attitudes, perceived
news bias, and perceived credibility.

As they expected, a strong relationship
was found to exist between the three. If
the bias was seen to be in the direction of
the respondent's own political position, he
found news coverage credible: if it went
in the opposite direction, he found the news
incredible.

Does this mean the news was biased?
Probably the opposite, say the authors. A
majority of both liberals and conservatives
thought that news programmes, on the
whole, were biased *in their favour*. This is
a fairly clear sign that they were both neu-
tral—and accurate.

Economic words

It is widely held that linguistic standardi-
sation is an essential precondition of na-
tional economic and social development.
Many developing countries are attempting
to develop a national language, or at least,
a lingua franca, for this reason. But is the
basic premise true? Richard Jones of the
Oregon Research Institute has attempted
to measure linguistic standardisation, in
order to test this (*International Journal of
Psychology*, vol 8, No. 1, page 51).

Three indices were needed, in the end,
to cover different aspects of linguistic stan-
dardisation: form and structure; use; and
universality. A language may be used over
a large area, as he points out, but still not
be an appropriate vehicle for modern com-
munication, or even known to all users in
the same form. The linguistic situations in
44 countries where the Peace Corps was
active were coded according to these indi-
ces. The results were compared with the
scores of these countries on a fourth index,
which measured stage of social and econ-
omic development.

He found the premise to be largely sub-
stantiated. A high score on any of the lan-
guage counts tended to mean an advanced
stage of development, and so on, down the
line. The three counts were, in fact, quite
closely related themselves. A standardised
form was most closely linked with develop-
ment; then diversity in use. It seemed to
matter rather less how wide a usage the
language had.

There need not necessarily be a causal
connection here, says Jones, in his conclu-
sion. But "it does seem eminently reason-
able, that commonality of language among
peoples would facilitate the kinds of human
behaviour required to improve economic
and social conditions in developing coun-
tries."