



# Anti-social bee-haviour

By Jonathan Duffy  
BBC News Magazine

**How do you discipline teenagers when, some at least, see punishment as a reward rather than a penalty? Studies of female-led societies present some rather unpalatable answers.**



How successive home secretaries and police chiefs must dream of such arrangements, where just a single step out of line is met with a swift, ruthless rebuke.

No tricky human rights laws to navigate. No hand-wringing solicitors to slow things down or namby-pamby distractions like, yawn, the Rule of Law.

The regime in question is not that of some tyrannical Central Asian state or even a snapshot of how Britain one day might be - regardless of what's been said about how the UK is the most spied-on country in the world - but is much closer to home. It's the Order of the Beehive.

Honey bees abide by a strict social order but for years scientists have scratched their heads at how their simple but effective laws are enforced. Some assumed the bees acted out of altruism. But now it turns out coercion is the key.

The sum of which contrasts sharply with the latest evidence of human behaviour in 21st Century Britain.

On every indicator of recklessness - drugs, drink, violence, promiscuity - British teenagers come out worst, according to research by the Institute of Public Policy Research.

**“ Let's not demonise a whole generation. We are talking very, very small numbers ”**  
Home Office minister Tony McNulty  
**Asbos are 'badge of honour'**

Try to rope them in, and it gets even harder. Another study, by the Youth Justice Board, found that Asbos - Anti-Social Behavioural Orders - which seek to curtail disruptive behaviour, are seen by some teenagers not as a punishment but a reward.

This unruliness comes despite the fact Britain is now a "surveillance society" - it is home to 20% of all CCTV cameras on Earth - according to yet another report out this week, from the Information Commissioner.

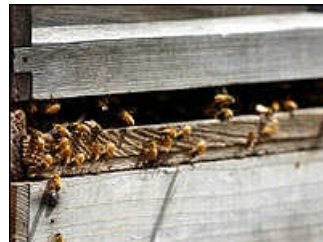
## Herod complex

Given such stark differences between the honey bee and human worlds, do we, perhaps, have anything to learn from our six-legged friends?

If your name's Josef Stalin or Kim Jong-il, you're already there. The unpalatable truth about our frenetic pollen-hungry friends is that they operate a sort of mini police state.

When it comes to disobedience in the beehive, there's no greater challenge to authority than a worker bee reproducing.

Breeding is the sole prerogative of the queen bee, one that she clearly takes seriously since she will often lay her own weight in eggs every day. But given that most bees are female - males are only used for reproduction - why do the humble workers not lay their own eggs?



Six legs good...

It had been thought bees were just well-behaved respecters of authority - the sort of attitude that in the human world could perhaps be encouraged with a swift, and strategically applied, Asbo.

Research by Dr Tom Wenseleers, of the University of Leuven, in Belgium, and Professor Francis Ratnieks, of the University of Sheffield, has found some worker bees do, in fact, lay eggs. But such acts of sedition are immediately stamped out by fellow workers who kill the eggs by eating them. Forget Asbos, this is Queen Bee as King Herod.

Other insect groups, the team found, were less effective in policing their workers - leaving it to the queen to do the killing - and as a result saw higher proportions of workers laying eggs.

But in the jackboot state of the honey beehive, just 0.1% of workers stepped out of

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line, and spawned.

It's hard not to have a grudging respect for such efficient law enforcement, says bee keeper and admirer, Dr Ivor Davis.

“ It's more like a communist-type approach, but done honestly ”

Dr Ivor Davis

"You can see immediately that the female society - one that's focused on reproduction - is fairly ruthless but entirely efficient," says Mr Davis, who is president of the British Bee Keepers Association.

So might we, perhaps, glean a few lessons from the Order of the Beehive? That would require a re-adjustment to something like a collectivist model everyone is working for the common good.

"It's a mistake to think of bees as individual organisms. To them, the colony is a single organism in whose best interests they act," says Mr Davis.

In the 20 years he's spent studying bees, he's often found himself comparing their habits to human society.

"It's more like a communist-type approach, but done honestly, rather than the inevitable corruption that tainted human communist states, because honey bees can't be corrupted. The workers have a sanction on the queen because they feed her on nectar and pollen. The more they feed her, the more eggs she can lay."

Liberals will find it a repugnant model. The question is - would they be prepared to boycott their morning honey fix for such an ideal?

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