What has it meant to be a ‘liberal’ in recent controversies about crime control? In this lecture I set out to answer this question. My argument is that a particular variant of liberal ideology – termed by Judith Shklar ‘the liberalism of fear’ – has contested the politics of criminal justice over recent decades. This variant of liberalism is an ideology of protection – shaped by memory not hope, focused on cruelty and its prevention, worried about ‘excesses of official agents at every level of government’. My purpose in the lecture - which forms part of an extended project entitled ‘In search of a better politics of crime’ – is to offer a rational reconstruction of this strand of liberal ideology. What are its central commitments? What vision of crime governance does it articulate and defend? What are its virtues, and its faults and silences? What elements of this worldview should a better politics of crime retain, discard or adapt? In the aftermath of Brexit and the election of Donald Trump, when liberal ideals are contested and in retreat, this kind of ideological appraisal seems both an important and pressing task.

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