JENNY CHAMBERLAIN IS A
NORTH & SOUTH SENIOR WRITER.
PHOTOGRAPHY JOHN COWPLAND.

Mr Sensible

Hawke's Bay farmer Garth McVicar set up the Sensible Sentencing Trust in 2001 to deal to New Zealand's crime problem. JENNY CHAMBERLAIN talks to the man who cried "Enough!"

A sweet wind ruffles the flags at the gateway to Riverland Station homestead. Beyond, the yellow brick house on a hill at the end of McVicar Rd — a loose-gravel no-exit deep in Hawke's Bay backcountry — is home to a patriot. Beside the right-hand flagpole a 1948 three-furrow plough rusts on its stand. The inscription records that Ian and Betty McVicar started farming here in 1954: "Four generations now share the dream".

From the vantage point of Copper's broad back Garth McVicar, patriotic owner of Riverland and formidable founder of the law and order lobby group the Sensible Sentencing Trust looks out over his parents' 1950s dream. Dogs huff around the Appaloosa's hooves and McVicar reaches down to give his horse's dappled neck an affectionate rub. "These and this," he says, thrusting out two workworn freckled hands and jabbing them at his weathered noggin, "I always tell my kids they're all you've got".

Using "these and this", McVicars have in five decades carved productivity from the storybook landscape and it has done them proud: stands of poplars — doubling as stock feed in times of drought — flash limey-green against a backdrop of cobalt hills; dark pine forests — 160 hectares due for harvesting in a couple of years — stretch beside a chunk of QEII-covenanted native bush; beehives guarantee clover will be pollinated; vast grazing paddocks fatten 130 beef cattle and 1500 skittish deer; there's a sika trophy hunting block where tourists can bag a wild stag; an outdoor education camp — now privately owned — and, far away, the cold silver snake of the Mohaka River offering 11 kilometres of "some of the best fishing in New Zealand".

McVicar passionately loves these 800 hectares and the incomparable Kiwi country lifestyle they bestow but says he's simply an appreciative "caretaker" who doesn't measure wealth in dollars. Riverland's "very simple operation" runs on an annual turnover of around $220,000. McVicar draws a wage from this but most of it "goes back into the farm — farms are big, bottomless pits".

During the early years on Riverland — long before the Sensible Sentencing Trust maelstrom hit — McVicar undertook his first self-transformation, morphing from unsure, tongue-tied country boy into business-savvy entrepreneur by studying accountancy and business management and joining Toastmasters. He started two enterprises — earthmoving and house removal businesses — and ran them successfully, in addition to farming. He says he used to take on the "impossible jobs" everyone else turned down, because "that's where the challenges were and you got paid better".

Always backing him was Anne, the Wellington girl he'd met and fallen in love with over dinner at a relative's house in 1971. The pair were married within six months and Anne, who worked for a Wainuiomata furniture wholesaler and had never been on a farm before ("she was scared of cows and sheep") became a farmer's wife. "I was working huge hours and if Anne wanted to see me it meant camping at whatever job I was on — in a tent. I'd be out the back of Taupo and she'd just arrive and put a candlelit dinner on," says McVicar, whose love and admiration for his lifelong helpmate are undiminished.

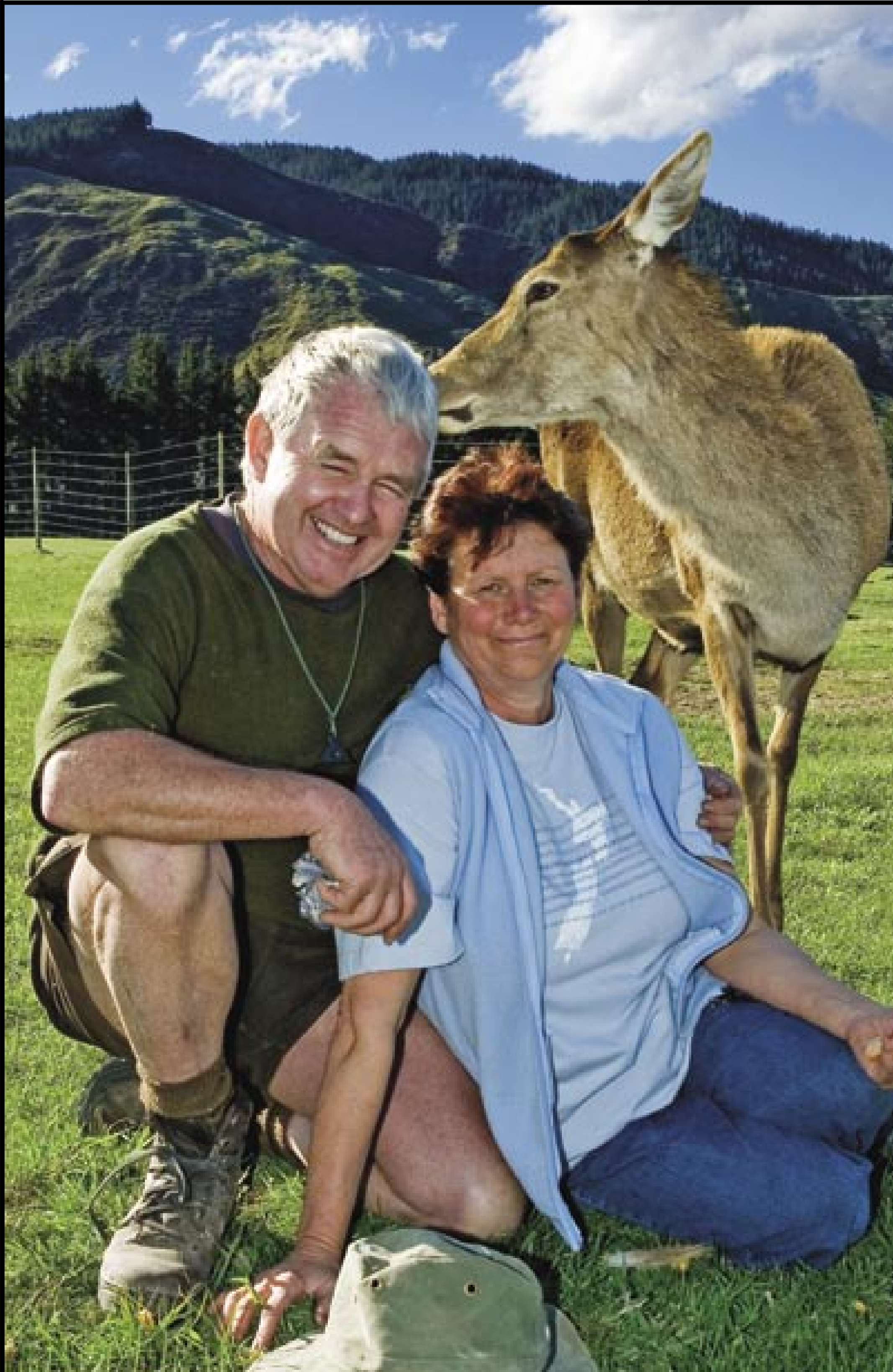
The sale of these two enterprises helped set the Sensible Sentencing Trust (SST) on its expensive feet. Since its 2001 inception it's cost the McVicars $350,000 and no, the trust is not funded by the Exclusive Brethren.

"I wish," jokes McVicar. Donations — the Napier Returned and Services Association recently gave $100,000 — and sponsorship help cover the trust's travel and administrative costs.

If Riverland is McVicar's refuge, his strength is his wife and family. Fifteen family members, accommodated in various houses scattered across the property, co-dwell at Riverland. They include Ruth, Garth's older sister, Natasha, 31, and Carla, 27, two of the couple's four daughters, their respective husbands Ken and Leighton and four grandchildren, aged 13 months to three (who will attend Te Pohue Playcentre and school, just as their mothers did). Daughters Kirsty, 25, and Jessica, 22, live in Australia and Auckland respectively.

Anne was a stay-at-home mum who baked, bottled, sewed and knitted. The girls came home to farm chores, outdoor play and after-school activities — "not television" — and the next generation are being raised likewise.

McVicar's the dead spit of his father Ian who, with diminutive Betty, still lives and works on Riverland. Now in their 80s the senior McVicars are fully involved with the day-to-day farming, shifting stock and feeding breeding cows. Just as well, considering the amount of time their second eldest son spends churning up McVicar Rd dust on his way to the Sensible Sentencing Trust Art Deco office 45 minutes away in Napier (he's there Tuesdays and Thursdays) or heading north or south on arduous nationwide speaking tours. "My hands were sweating when I first hit Auckland's motorways," McVicar chuckles. "If you want to get something done, get it done in Auckland. But you can keep the traffic."



If Riverland is McVicar's refuge, his strength is his wife Anne and family.

Never for a moment did New Zealand's most unpretentious, most powerful grassroots campaigner imagine the organisation he founded to get tough on crime would become so influential and draw his energies so far from home. It's got to the point where Anne has to micromanage the week's schedule to carve an hour for them to eat dinner together with the phone off.

McVicar, 55, says he and Anne have "worked hard, done reasonably well. We thought we'd settle back and enjoy our life". Now he finds himself in classic baby-boomer second adulthood: financially secure, in good health, with oodles of energy, up to his eyeballs in a new and very public role.

"When we started the SST in 2001 I thought we'd go hard for 18 months and then go home," he laughs. Who'd have thought a Hawke's Bay cocky who "used to put judges on pedestals" would be ringing them up whenever. McVicar says he is in close regular contact with Don Brash — though he has no illusions about the future survival of this accessibility if the National leader ever comes to power.

It's McVicar's cock-sparrow cheerfulness you don't expect. And his candour. Detractors paint him as a blood-lusting, lock-em-up-and-throw-

away-the-key redneck — an image he's well aware of — but even his sternest critics, John Whitty, national director of the Prisoners' Aid and Rehabilitation Societies (PARS), John Pratt, Victoria University professor of criminology, and Kathy Dunstall, Howard League for Penal Reform secretary, testify to his likeability, sincerity and intelligence.

These qualities have stood him in good stead during a gruelling and often gruesome crusade to capture the emotional high ground in law and order. So too have energy, determination and commitment — all of which he has in spades. "We call it the X factor. Everyone who works for us has the X factor, or they simply run out of steam," he laughs.

Any adversary would be wise not to underestimate Garth McVicar. When cornered he is simply, genuinely pleasant. Recalls Anne: "John Pratt was attacking us, Garth especially, on National Radio. We decided the best thing was to go and see him."

Continues Garth: "I went in thinking this is going to be a full-on confrontation. My opening words were, 'So, you don't believe in personal accountability and responsibility'. He said, 'Yes, I do'. We had more in common than we thought. I never personally attack anybody. People are allowed to disagree."

Before the SST, McVicar barely knew how to switch on a computer. True to form, he upskilled, taking an IT course and acquainting himself with the latest technology. He answers the SST's 100 emails a day in person.

Anne is as much part of the SST setup as she is a part of Riverland: one of a team of four female SST office support volunteers, her main responsibility is finance.

The weeks are packed with meetings, speaking engagements, writing reports and press releases, talking to victims, lawyers and politicians and responding to media requests for comment on crime-related matters.

Victoria's John Pratt, who specialises in punishment, penal policy and sentencing, concedes McVicar has become "a very important person in penal affairs" over the past few years. Pratt gets phoned by the media too but "Garth McVicar attracts a lot more interest".

Politicians are very aware of the power of the SST. In February, McVicar was invited to accompany Corrections Minister Damien O'Connor on a government-funded fact-finding mission to London, Amsterdam and Helsinki looking at half-open and fully open prisoner re-integration systems, which have the potential to reduce recidivism. McVicar wrote a detailed report but the thing that shocked him was the discovery London's International Centre for Prison Studies uses New Zealand as an example of what not to do — "because we use our prisons as holding tanks, one-stop shops to fix all our social ills".

New Zealand's prison population has doubled every 10 years since 1986. In December 2005 we had 7518 inmates — around 187 per 100,000 population, compared with Britain's 141, Australia's 120 and Canada's 100. If we follow the current trajectory we'll be locking up 9000 prisoners by 2010 — an extraordinary 220 inmates per 100,000. Penal reformers and criminologists say internationally New Zealand is already a penal curiosity.

McVicar won't be drawn on whether he feels more prisons are the answer, simply saying the situation is "a sad indictment on the last 35 years. I want to stop so many of our kids going on this cradle-to-jail journey. The only way I can see of doing that is to look at the bigger picture: 22 per cent of young people leaving school functionally illiterate, mental health patients ending up in prison instead of receiving needed treatment, the dismal failure of our social welfare system and the breakdown in family values."

The SST's second big project this year has been Cradle To Jail — October's 10-day speaking tour by former *Spectator* columnist and prolific journalist Theodore Dalrymple — aka Anthony Daniels — author of the searing, sometimes bleakly funny *Life At The Bottom: The Worldview That Makes The Underclass* (2001).

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Daniels, who now lives in France, spent most of his professional life as a doctor and psychiatrist in a Birmingham slum hospital and prison. He's been dubbed a "compassionate conservative" for his railings against what he sees as the "unholy alliance between politicians, bureaucrats and liberal intellectuals who have…debased the quality of life of millions of people, especially the poor". It's their liberal experiment, writes Daniels, which "renders the British population virtually defenceless against criminals and criminality."

When he read *Life At The Bottom*, McVicar found his philosophical home. "It was very exciting. I was reading it at night in bed and nudging Anne, telling her things he'd written and using a highlighter to mark sections. [Daniels] is a guiding light for me. He's like us, except obviously he's at a much higher level — we see ourselves as social reformers for New Zealand."

Echoing his mentor, McVicar believes New Zealand's crime problem was started by "well-meaning, short-sighted liberals who still believe all we need to do to fix the problem is become more loving and liberal. The real shame of it is the promoters of this social vandalism aren't the ones bearing the consequences — our young people are. The jails are full of them."

Anthony Daniels arrived in New Zealand on October 6 and stayed with the McVicars. He is scheduled to speak in Tauranga on October 17 and in Auckland on October 18.

The SST collaborated with two Christian organisations, For The Sake Of Our Children (headed by Christine Rankin and John Sax) and the Family First Lobby (headed by Bob McCoskrie), to bring Daniels here. McVicar is not a fundamentalist Christian. He was raised a Methodist "but I don't go to church and I don't practise. I'm not even sure of the meaning of the word Christian. But if you mean doing unto others as you would be done by, then I certainly am [a Christian]."

But the SST often works with the Christian Right. The trust, along with several Christian groups, made a submission opposing Green MP Sue Bradford's bill to remove from the Crimes Act the provision (Section 59) that allows parents to use "reasonable force" when disciplining children.

And in July this year the SST was a member of the Section 59 Coalition, which brought supposed Swedish lawyer Ruby Harrold-Claesson to New Zealand to strengthen opposition to Bradford's bill — though McVicar says the trust did not provide funding. (Extensive checking of Harrold-Claesson's credentials failed to confirm her professional status, she did not stand up well in a TV One *Close Up* interview and she was unable to provide credible backup for her claims that the removal of smacking rights has left good Swedish parents facing criminal charges in court.)

A Christian Right-SST alliance is not deliberate trust policy, says McVicar: "I work with anyone who's pro-active." He says the SST does not receive funding from Christian groups, although John Sax has helped to fund the Anthony Daniels tour.

McVicar did get in touch with another Daniels/Dalrymple admirer, Great Potentials Foundation CEO and tireless child advocate Lesley Max, whose views on the Bradford bill couldn't be further from McVicar's. "Garth asked me if I wanted to be involved in the tour but…there are major differences in outlook between SST and me — eg on Section 59. I have been promoting repeal for 20 years."

Max says she attended meetings and tried to persuade tour organisers of the futility of focusing only on sentencing. "I urged the trajectory from birth to jail should be the focus. That was accepted, which was a very positive development." Max subsequently dissociated herself from tour organisers but says she found Garth "a very nice person, well intentioned and effective…I think there may well be some opportunity for greater understanding."

Smiles McVicar: "I think Lesley was surprised we did get on. I think she thought I was a throw-away-the-key radical."

Peel away the mutual suspicion and rhetoric from anyone vocal in the area of penal reform and you find most want the same things: early intervention, stronger families, less crime, more accountability and fewer prisons — right when we are pouring $1 billion into building four new ones.

The Sensible Sentencing Trust grew out of McVicar's realisation all was not well beyond Riverland's borders. But to understand why he felt he had to become New Zealand's Mr Fixit in law and order, we must look back at the innocence of a 1950s childhood on this same farm.

McVicar, the third of four siblings, was schooled by correspondence in a tent in whichever paddock his parents were breaking in. When he wasn't studying he was riding, hunting or eeling — an unfettered, outdoor boyhood.

There's a photo on the wall in McVicar's Riverland office of a

skinny boy holding a .308 rifle leading a packhorse with a sika deer carcass slung over the saddle. McVicar was 15 when it was taken. "The bush was my kingdom in those days."

Though he can't recall being strapped by his parents, he tested their patience. "I was pretty exuberant, had a lot of energy. Every time I pushed the boundaries my parents pulled me back — I had to grub thistles or round up sheep." At 13 he was sent to board at Napier Boys' High School — which came as a profound shock. "They tried to keep me within the school bounds and rules but I thought I was going to teach them a thing or two."

It was at Napier Boys that the rebellious boy became familiar with corporal punishment, being caned regularly for things such as going down to Napier beach for a swim. "I was used to going where I wanted on the farm."

His record was 36 strokes in one day administered by headmaster Darcy Caird, but far from being emotionally scarred McVicar claims the canings were "fantastic. I've been back and thanked the headmaster for them."

Two subsequent encounters with a police officer and a judge also left an impression. The policeman, Jack Green, pulled him over — "I had a Mark II Zephyr and was causing mayhem around town"

He assumes personal and generational responsibility for a culture of liberalism that has destroyed the society he knew. "We had the best years this country has seen. Who's responsible? It's my generation. It's got to be."

— took him 20 kilometres out of town, confiscated his car keys, socks and shoes and made the boy racer walk back barefoot. During a later court appearance for underage drinking the judge threatened imprisonment for his appearing without a tie.

McVicar sympathises with teachers facing increasing student violence and believes corporal punishment should be reintroduced. "People say that's terrible, that if you beat kids they'll end up beating back. But we've forgotten teenage exuberance. I'd be in jail now if I hadn't been beaten."

He's hugely nostalgic for the days when the police, the courts and the justice system all commanded respect. "A lot of our kids don't have those boundaries today. By the time the courts get hold of them there's not much chance of reform.

"When [14-year-old South Auckland boy Ngatai Rewiti] picked up that block of concrete what was going on in his head? He hadn't been held accountable at any stage of his life for anything he did. Ultimately he threw it off a bridge and killed [Taupo man Chris Currie] without even thinking about it. What I was continually taught was every action had consequences — whether it was walking back to the car or the cane."

McVicar feels it was while his generation were enjoying the fruits of New Zealand's golden age that they let their guard down and let the liberals in. "Everything I wanted to do I was able to do. We were one of the safest countries in the Western world. But while I was out there working frantically and gaining money I allowed the country that I loved to deteriorate to what it is."

He assumes personal and generational responsibility for a culture of liberalism that has destroyed the society he knew. "We had the best years this country has seen. Who's responsible? It's my generation. It's got to be."

His original, personal unease stemmed from high-profile violent rape and murder cases, among them Napier girl Colleen Burrows, 15, who was raped, kicked and beaten to death by Mongrel Mob member Sam Te Hei in 1987; Hutt Valley 13-year-old Karla Cardno, killed by Paul Dally in 1989; and Paul Bailey's rape and murder of 15-year-old South Otago schoolgirl Kylie Smith in 1991. "It seems to be girls who are targeted by violent crime and I suppose because I was a father of four young daughters I felt more vulnerable."

These crimes outraged the public, more so when it became known that the offenders had had many previous convictions and been allowed out on bail or parole. The victims' families made representations to the Government — including a 270,000-signature petition organised by Kylie Smith's family in 1992 asking for convicted brutal murderers to be jailed until they die, no bail for first-time serious sex offenders and no parole for sex offenders — but they got nowhere. McVicar was appalled. "It [the petition] was delivered to Parliament but the politicians ignored it."

Similarly, Christchurch man Norm Withers' 307,000-signature petition calling for a referendum on violent crime penalties — organised after the brutal 1997 bashing of his mother Nan, 71, by Harry Houkamau during a shop robbery — was also ignored, claims McVicar. "Each time public apathy got deeper entrenched. We were just recycling violent offenders. I was becoming more and more angry and thinking what can one man do?"

The turning point came in 2001, when McVicar drove to Auckland to sit through the trial of Karla Cardno's stepfather Mark Middleton — charged with threatening to kill Paul Dally. "What I heard changed my life forever. I saw the judge cry as he read the details of what Dally did to Karla. I agreed with Middleton. If anybody hurt one of my daughters I'd be saying the same thing.

"I rang Mark and I said, 'Are you a nutter or just a caring stepfather?' He said, 'I'm what I appear to be — terribly frustrated at a system that allowed Paul Dally out. He had 78 previous offences, including rape, and they let him out to prey on my daughter and kill her. I want somebody held accountable and I don't want him out on the street again'." (Dally can re-apply for parole in 2007.)

McVicar's constant presence at the back of the court caused news reporters to notice him. "Maybe they thought I was a relative." When Middleton was found guilty, a "ropeable" McVicar found himself being interviewed. "I said, 'When a dog on the farm goes mad and starts worrying sheep you cannot reform it. You shoot it. In my opinion Dally is a mad dog. I'm not saying shoot him. I'm saying we shouldn't let him out.' I also said we were going to hold a protest."

By the time McVicar drove home the farmhouse phone was running hot. "Anne said, 'What have you done? Everyone wants to join the protest'." The small demonstration scheduled for February 16 2001 outside the High Court at Auckland — where Middleton was due to be sentenced — grew into a nationwide protest outside 64 of New Zealand's 67 courthouses. Petitions at each location attracted a total of 16,100 signatures and were a springboard for the formation of the trust.

McVicar "didn't want to be a leader of anything" but found himself cast in the role. The formation of a political party was mooted but he says he's seen "too many politicians go [to Wellington], drink the water and lose their good intentions. I didn't want to go that way. I wanted to set up an organisation and call it Family First, believe it or not. But people talked me out of that. They said the name wouldn't grab public attention — we had to stick to what prompted people's support in the first place. We decided to focus on the recidivist violent offender to bring people on board."

It's a strategy that has worked — attracting support and attention from victims, the media, politicians, offenders and thousands of average New Zealanders to the SST hub — a suite of rimu-panelled offices in an elegant building in Napier's CBD. On the footpath outside the cream building in Hastings St is a small sandwich board emblazoned with the SST logo and the slogan "Enough Is Enough". Upstairs is an austere meeting room with a table, a lofty window and a wall display of crime and human suffering. Among the clippings and photographs is an image of a weeping Ida Hawkins, mother of Colleen Burrows. Nearby Rita Croskery, mother of slain South Auckland pizza delivery man Michael Choy, sits alone amid a sea of white crosses on the steps of Parliament.

Surrounded by his army of four, the voluble McVicar is on song in this office. Sometimes he stretches his arms up high and wide like a saviour. Sometimes he rests his hands on his head and leans back, light blue eyes crinkling around the edges.

This morning's meeting is to finalise details of a new website, Sensible Sentencing Solutions, directing members to home and property security businesses. It will be run by business development manager Christine Chambers, a former prison officer, who says she's here "to make a difference". The website will help raise funds for the trust — which costs around $300,000 a year to run.

All four volunteers (paid $150 a week by the trust) have personal reasons for being here: apart from supporting her husband, Anne wants "a better deal for victims, from that will come justice reform". National secretary Wendy Pedler is friends with the Reaney family, whose seven-year-old son Simon was murdered by Anthony Roma in Napier in 1991: "I saw their journey through the justice system and how abominably they were treated. I'm here to fight for victims' rights."

Janine Harrison, membership database manager, is sister of Gresham Marsh, who with Leith Ray killed elderly Waikato couple John and Josie Harrisson in 1994. Marsh is due to be considered for parole soon and Harrison says her brother is "a threat to society — he doesn't comprehend what he has done and he hasn't done anything to help himself while in prison". Her goal: to help reduce the number of Maori in prison — "there's far too many of my race inside. SST is about educating our people about good family homes."

Their binding mission is to break through public apathy by

highlighting specific cases and supporting victims — drawing them out of the shadows and into the heart of the judicial process. The trust's 10 objectives are: life to mean life for aggravated murder, with no right of parole; an end to the current parole system with the introduction of ongoing supervision upon release for all repeat violent offenders and sex offenders; compulsory DNA testing for all criminal convictions; restitution and reparation to victims by criminals; secure confinement for the criminally insane; compensation paid to criminals to be paid to victims (or into a consolidated victim fund); a reduction in the age of criminal responsibility; victim input into sentencing and parole; abolition of concurrent sentencing; job training, education and work skills training for prison inmates.

McVicar says prior to the September 2005 election National signed up to all 10 SST policies, as did New Zealand First, Act and United Future. Labour signed up to only five. "Before the next election we've got to make sure none of these parties back off any of them." He says the SST is apolitical and "is staying that way". He won't disclose total membership but aims for 500,000 members by 2008 and reckons he's half way there. Politicians have signed up "to get into the inner workings of the trust and gain access to the membership rolls", he says, but the list is kept secure partly because it contains victims' details. The SST offenders' database, compiled from publicly available information and listing each offender's convictions, is open to the public (www.safe-nz.org.nz). McVicar says even the Department of Corrections uses it for speed of access and accuracy.

Alongside the victims' gallery there's a graph depicting the rise in violent crime from 1951, when McVicar was born, to now. From two murders a year in the 1950s the line shoots suddenly skywards in the '70s. Clearly marked are the legislative and societal changes that McVicar believes have led to today's criminogenic society: legal aid, welfare benefits, banning corporal punishment, the shift to offenders' rights.

McVicar sketches on a whiteboard the "law and order umbrella — the rules of society we all live under". Education, health, welfare and family values form the spokes and he sees them as broken: 22 per cent of prison inmates are "mental health patients causing turmoil and making rehabilitation of good inmates impossible; 17 per cent come in off the dole without skills to get a job; a lot of our inmates can't read or write. We see ourselves right at the top of the umbrella — continually caning a system which has failed us." Violent crime, he says, has risen eight per cent a year since 2001.

McVicar doesn't trust the government to end this waste of human potential. "It's a three-yearly lolly scramble and politicians are only interested in getting back in." The only way is to build an organisation "representing hundreds of thousands of New Zealanders who will tell government where we want to go as a nation".

McVicar and his army of four volunteers: (from left) Wendy Pedler, Janine Harrison, Anne McVicar and Christine Chambers.

People pay attention to crime only when it directly affects them, says McVicar. "What we are trying to do is motivate New Zealanders to own the problem before they are affected by it." He does this through the victims who beat a path to his door. "We bat for the victims every step of the way. [Prison rehabilitation groups] see the perpetrators as victims. We see them as people who made a deliberate, conscious choice. I can introduce you to lots of kids who had a bad upbringing but made a fantastic success of themselves. I don't swallow this [bad upbringing] excuse." He gets results.

"Kelly Pigott's case is a classic. Her daughter [Napier six-year-old Teresa Cormack] was murdered [in 1987] well before we started SST. She came to us for help. She said in her opinion if New Zealand had had DNA testing from the first time an offender was convicted her daughter would still be alive. Jules Mikus, with 78 previous offences, would have been caught.

"I said it made sense to me. Let's see if we can get you before a select committee and make some changes to the DNA legislation. So we did. We lobbied hard and met individual politicians. We took Kelly to Parliament and she spoke to the justice and electoral select committee in 2001. The politicians had to look into the eyes of a mother who'd lost her six-year-old. And the bodily samples law was changed in 2002. Police now have the right to take DNA off anyone who has had a jail sentence of longer than two years — as a direct result of the SST. It's not rocket science.

"Government is a three-yearly lolly scramble and politicians are only interested in getting back in. The only way is to build an organisation representing hundreds of thousands of New Zealanders who will tell government where we want to go as a nation."

"The Police Association backed us but the civil liberties movement totally opposed us. They said it was against human rights and civil liberties. If you haven't broken the law then I agree. But if you have offended then I'm sorry, you've lost your rights. You give your DNA and it goes into the databank. If you only offend once it's no problem. What Kelly said was right.

"We see the benefits of this work. When Kelly first came to see me I'd never seen a woman so destroyed. I've never lost a child, so I don't know what it feels like, but looking into the eyes of someone who has, I can understand.

"Her friends crossed the street because they didn't know how to talk to her. She'd gone into her own shell, as had Ida Hawkins. Ida couldn't talk about her daughter's death until her SST involvement. Once we gave them a voice and took them to Parliament, they realised the world wasn't such a bad place. People cared. Kelly is a forceful woman again carrying herself tall and proud. After we took her to Parliament she got off the dole.

"[Victims] don't need to be involved with us on a day-to-day basis once we've got them to that level again. We learned this by accident. It wasn't something we intended to do when we set up SST. I suppose we help them dig themselves out of the deep, dark hole society has driven them into."

McVicar is on the case of Susan Couch, the Auckland accountant left for dead after the triple murder by William Bell at the Mt Wellington-Panmure RSA in December 2001. Couch survived against heavy odds and is now living off a small pension while lawyers work gratis on the groundbreaking case against the Attorney-General and the Department of Corrections. The SST is paying her out-of-pocket expenses.

"We want monetary compensation for Sue Couch. Ultimately we want to change the system which allowed William Bell to tear up his parole conditions, give them the fingers and walk out."

A victims' reparation fund is a core SST objective. "At present if your house gets burgled the offender comes before the court and the judge asks if they would like to offer reparation. The offender says yes and the judge orders $5000 reparation. The offender gets a discount on his sentence but he'll never pay the money. We want a victims' reparation fund — a 12 per cent levy on every fine or crime going through the courts."

Canada, says McVicar, has restitution centres where offenders work eight-hour days to pay board, lodging and reparation. He's promoting this idea with the ministers of justice and corrections.

In a tragic irony the SST was instrumental in obtaining an arrest in the murder of one of the trust's founding members, McVicar's longtime friend and farming neighbour Jack Nicholas, who was gunned down at the gate of his remote Hawke's Bay farm in August 2004. He'd talked with McVicar for years about shared frustrations with law and order. "When we set this up he was one of the first guys to send me a cheque. It affected me deeply when he got shot.

"The police were having trouble getting a breakthrough when a businessman rang SST to set up a $32,000 reward. It gained a fair bit of publicity and a girl emailed to say she thought she knew who killed Jack." The trust won her confidence and she went to the police. Her co-operation led to the April arrest near Napier of Murray Foreman, 50. He initially faced firearms charges, but the following month was formally charged with murder. He was released on bail in August and the preliminary hearing is scheduled for November 20 this year.

When McVicar talks about New Zealand prisons and the waste of taxpayer money and human potential they represent — "we release them with $370 in their pocket, saying see ya later, without teaching them a thing on the way through" — he starts to sound like his "liberal" opponents. The SST and its opponents "ultimately want the same thing: fewer prisons, fewer inmates", he says. "But we believe we've got to look after our victims on the way through. Some offenders you're not going to reform or rehabilitate. If we go down the PARS [Prisoners Aid and Rehabilitation Societies] pathway, which moves the offender away from direct accountability and responsibility, we're going to build more prisons because hard-core recidivist criminals taint the guys coming in at the bottom.

"I go to their seminars and PARS come to our functions but as long as they're going to tell me offenders like Sam Te Hei are victims like Ida Hawkins, the mother of the girl he killed, we're poles apart. I can introduce you to a girl Sam Te Hei raped before he killed

Colleen Burrows. He knew what he was doing was wrong. Don't blame his upbringing for that."

McVicar insists he's not lobbying for longer sentences. What he's interested in is the time it takes for an offender to be rehabilitated and the methods used. And he's under no illusions about jail, describing his visit to Hawke's Bay Regional Prison as "the most daunting day I've ever spent".

"These guys recognised me and were coming up to the cages like animals. Yeah, they'd committed heinous offences and deserved to be there, but to think our country has deteriorated to the extent that this is the best method we have of dealing with them. In the youth wing the guys were playing tennis and badminton. They've got bodies most young guys would die for. They've got all day to exercise. It seems such a waste of talent. It's despicable we haven't got a better mechanism to stop them going in there in the first place.

"After they get out of the youth wing they continue reoffending until they end up in the adult wing. And we still haven't come up with a system of rehabilitating them, or reforming them, or stopping their drug and alcohol use, or violence. We just let them out."

About 18 months after the SST was set up, McVicar says, he was sitting in the spa pool with Anne talking about how horrific crimes were eating away at them. "I said, 'This is going to kill us if we can't learn to deal with it'. We were determined to make a difference but we had to survive — so we treat it as a business. I know that sounds terrible but we try not to let the cases we're dealing with affect our home and family life. You can't completely do that but we don't let it eat away like we did in the early days."

That doesn't mean he spares his audiences. McVicar can freeze a room with his gut-wrenching descriptions of New Zealand's dark side. I watch him do it at Napier's plush Princess Alexandra Retirement Village in Battery Rd where 60 elderly gentlemen and guests — among them a teacher from McVicar's old school who'd just been burgled — gathered for a belated Fathers' Day dinner.

McVicar works the room and I talk to retired viticulturist Eric Gray, guest of octogenarian resident Barry Thompson. Gray plays indoor bowls, golf croquet and bikes. He and his second wife have seven children, 17 grandchildren, three step-grandchildren and three step-great-grandchildren between them. Gray is looking forward to tonight's presentation, saying his generation has "had enough" of not being able to go where they want, of uncouth youth, of the punishment not fitting the crime and of people "losing their lives before they've had a chance to live them".

Hot roast dinners and glasses of wine are going down nicely when McVicar hits the elderly middle-class gathering with an unrelenting, quick-fire presentation covering: the 3000 per cent increase in crime since his boyhood; prisons as holding tanks; his visit to the youth wing of the local jail where 96 per cent of the strapping young men will end up in adult prison; the local rape of a six-year-old by three 13-year-olds; the failure of family group conferences; the $115 million a year and rising legal aid system; the vileness of Jules Mikus; Kelly Pigott's brave stance on DNA.

The chilled room falls silent as he moves on to a description of how Mongrel Mob members took Colleen Burrows to a river, where she was raped, half-buried and kicked with steel-capped boots and then her head was run over by a car. How the principal instigator, Sam Te Hei, has received more than $100,000 in compensation for ill-treatment in prison while it took Colleen's mother 10 years to scrape together money for her daughter's headstone.

"I'm pretty tough on my audience. I throw the responsibility back on them," he says. Does he really see the streets flowing in blood? "People, particularly older people, are afraid of crime. I believe they've got a reason to be. Our level of violent crime is totally unacceptable."

The day is fading at Riverland. McVicar opens the deer paddock gate and Bonnie his tame Danish red hind who was orphaned as a baby and hand-reared comes to him. Bonnie is seven and has had five fawns, "all very quiet". There are 250 larrikin weaner deer in the paddock with her but "she educates them and makes them easy to shift", he says. He's thinking about the upcoming visit of Anthony Daniels and wondering aloud how his hero will react to Riverland. "He might think it's nothing," he says self-deprecatingly.

Coinciding with the tour the SST releases its Strategic Plan Stage Two — a campaign lobbying for zero tolerance of youth offending, the area McVicar wanted to get active in right from the start. "More prisoners facing longer sentences for violent offending would not appear to be, on its own, addressing the frightening rates of crime in New Zealand," the strategy reads.

That's not the backdown it sounds. Longer sentences aren't what the SST stands for. Among the messages the new strategy will push are family values, rehabilitation through tough love and "a caring society taking care of its young". Beyond the flow of words, the talk of canings and blood on the streets, this is where Mr Sensible is heading: back to family, back to boundaries and the golden youth of an exuberant country boy who pushed them to the limit. ■