



Liberal Democrat leader Charles Kennedy explains to **Harry Shapiro** that drug testing schoolkids is wrong, legalisation is not on the agenda and how Anne Widdecombe sparked a more mature drugs debate

Liberal lines

What's your analysis of Labour's drug policy?

What we are concerned to address as a party is that we do not feel, given all the figures and all the evidence we have got, that as a country we have an effective drugs policy. Clearly it is not working. That's our starting point. And that leads us to our concluding point that we measure every proposal and initiative in terms of how effective it is going to be. And what do we define as effective? Come down hard on the pushers. Do the maximum to protect children. And put the emphasis on rehabilitation on education and on support in the community rather than punitive measures of the 'lock the door and throw away the key' mentality, which is all too often pandered to by some of the political parties.

But you did support the reclassification of cannabis?

There are some things that the government has done that we said 'ok', like cannabis reclassification. But there seems to be a common consensus that it wasn't explained properly, leaving different police forces operating under different policies or assumptions. Some of the people the police come face to face with think that cannabis is legal when it is not. That's a good example where the government has done a good thing, but gone about it in a very cack-handed fashion. We would have gone about it in a much more upfront and explanatory way both for the police and the general public. Labour wanted to send out the tough message and hope that the editor of the *Daily Mail* for example, didn't notice the soft reality. As a politician you have to start out by saying this is what I believe in – not in terms of police manpower or resources or clogging up the courts.

Would you go further with reform?

As far as legalisation is concerned, that could be something you move to longer term. But at the moment it is not an option because it is subject to so much international intricacies.

But if the policy is failing because of our treaty obligations, shouldn't we be looking to take the lead in re-looking at the international treaties?

Britain is occupying the chair of the European presidency in the second half of this year. If the chair is occupied by Tony Blair I don't get the impression that this is on his agenda – and to be fair I'm not sure it would be on ours at this stage in the cycle. Having just had reclassification, it would be better to go forward

prudently until you have much more information.

Coming back home, aren't we getting obsessed in this country with testing as a magic bullet to our drug problems – schoolchildren, offenders, sports people?

We oppose random drug testing in schools. As for other sorts of testing, it is much better to have treatment and testing orders that keep you out in the community than having people locked up. But the other side of the coin is that for all these people who are tested, we still only have very piecemeal support services, as the Audit Commission pointed out. Our response to the testing issue is very much the same as Anti Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs). We talk about ASBO plus, which means putting more emphasis before you reach the stage of actually having to apply for an ASBO. Even then, the emphasis should be on rehabilitation and community support. Tough Liberalism as Mark Oaten calls it – tough in terms of firmness and fairness, but liberal as well – we are not shying away from that one.

What about people in prison who commit minor offences to pay for drugs?

Take the example of a mother who goes shoplifting and then gets separated from her children; what sort of a social price are we paying for that? Surely the priority for society is to get that person healthy and not leave the children at the mercy of a social service department. Blair as the shadow home secretary was saying the prison population was too high ten years ago. So if it was a problem a decade ago, what kind of problem is it now?

You mentioned tackling the dealers, but surely that has always been a government priority. What would you do differently?

The whole issue is to deal with the dealers and the big guys and get them out of the picture and that's why we say that police resources should be spent catching them, not to be running around chasing after people who really don't affect anyone else. Drugs have always been difficult to police because of the geography of Britain. But then you look at the policies of this government in cutting back on coastal Customs – common sense tells you what will happen if you reduce Customs still further – more stuff won't get picked up until it is on the streets. That's part of a bigger picture about national security.

Interestingly, the government has come round to the view that we were expressing five years ago that if you police immigration and customs with one organisation and not three competing ones, then you stand a better

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chance of cutting back on people importing drugs. A common force is not the complete answer, but it's progress in the right direction.

Given some of the statements in your drug policy document like reclassifying ecstasy from A to B and introducing the lesser offence of social dealing – aren't you concerned, as so many politicians are, of being accused of being 'soft on drugs'? Nowadays, it seems this is the worst crime a politician can be accused of. Any party that calls itself or prides itself on being a Liberal Democrat party in British politics is going to be accused of being soft on drugs, crime and anything else you can imagine. But I am struck that when you actually cut through all that nonsense - that rhetoric

that you hear in the political debate - and you talk with real people about what concerns them, then you deal with things as people live them, then those things don't lose you votes. We know in reality that all the problems would not be solved by stringing up every dealer to the nearest lamp post – life isn't like that. The job of the politician is to lead the debate in a sensible direction, not to pander to simplistic solutions that might get you good headlines but will make not a jot of difference to the people you are trying to help.

But with politicians trying to 'out tough' each other on drugs, especially in the run up to an election – do you think we have a sensible debate on drugs in this country?

Somewhat more sensible than it would have been ten years ago. And I often think that, ironically, the person who did Parliament and politics a great service was Anne Widdecombe. The first interview I gave as party leader was to the *Observer* and they asked me if I agreed with party policy on the cannabis issue and I said, 'yes I do'. Anne Widdecombe was the shadow home secretary and she went straight on the attack about me campaigning for a soft approach to drugs. And then, of course, she made this a bit of a crusade at the Tory Party conference and suddenly all these Tories were queuing up to admit their past faults. I think it is a more sane debate. And Blunkett, to his credit, after Straw had said no change, opened up the debate. A lot more mature, but still a long way to go. ■

TALKING DRUGS: LIB DEM'S HOME AFFAIRS SPOKESMAN MARK OATEN

"If we can't organise effective drugs programmes with a captive audience, then it doesn't hold out much hope for running programmes outside prisons."

"Michael Howard's Alf Garnett approach to criminal justice policy is more hot air than heavyweight thinking."

"If they had treated alcohol abuse as seriously as drug abuse, we might not be seeing these increases in violent crime."

"The appropriate place for heroin users is a clinic not a cell."

"Whilst cannabis, like any drug, is harmful, reclassification makes sense. But only if it is matched by re-targeting resources."