

Time to end the 'war on drugs'?

On 24 January, the Home Affairs Select Committee (HASC) inquiry on drug policy, after considering evidence from Virgin boss Richard Branson, heard from Dame Ruth Runciman and Roger Howard of the UK Drug Policy Commission. 'Has the war on drugs been lost?', began HASC chair Keith Vaz. 'I don't think in those terms at all', Ruth Runciman replied, 'the polarities between the war on drugs and legalisation seem to pit sides against each other in terms of "lose", when there are many nuances that we need to consider very carefully'. And Keith Vaz's next question? 'Is the war on drugs successful?', to which Roger Howard replied 'as Dame Ruth said, in the UK we don't think we have had a war on drugs. We have had some pretty sensible drug policies over the last few years'.

For me, this exchange perfectly illustrates the tensions between attention-grabbing campaigning and detailed policy analysis and formulation. The increasingly indiscriminate use of the concept of a 'war on drugs' has certainly grabbed the attention of politicians, media and an assortment of celebrities, but is it actually helpful as a way of framing and facilitating the policy discussion we need to have?

If a 'war on drugs' is understood to refer – roughly speaking – to an approach which looks to enforcement to eliminate (or substantially reduce) the availability and use of drugs, and rejects harm management approaches, then, yes, it has certainly failed. But this has little to do with contemporary drug policy as it is practiced in many parts of the world. As Roger Howard argued, it is misleading to describe UK policy (the primary focus of the HASC) as 'a war on drugs'; consider, for example, the development of needle exchanges in the 1980s, massive expansion of drug treatment in the 1990s and the current interest in social



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reintegration and recovery.

Of course, there are genuine concerns about key aspects of law enforcement in the UK – including the numbers of vulnerable women in prison for drug offences committed in contexts of intimidation and exploitation (including drug mules) and the still high numbers of drug-related stop and searches.

But let's be honest – to end up in the courts (let alone prison) for a possession offence in the UK – unlike, say, the USA – you generally have to be very unlucky or very incautious or both. Roger Howard and Ruth Runciman went so far as to suggest that, on cannabis, 'we

are seeing a gradual decriminalisation in this country' (particularly with use of warnings and penalty notices).

Nor is it helpful during a period of spending cuts and far-reaching policy change to tell parliament that drug policy has been a 'failure' – it hasn't. In fact, overall drug use has fallen significantly, at least according to the British Crime Survey. Recent treatment figures suggest there has been a reduction in the numbers of people developing serious problems with heroin. Treatment services are hugely improved and are working better with many more people. Yes, there is still a lot to do (my list would include hepatitis, overdose prevention, prison treatment, family support, stigma and attitudes and access to housing, work and meaningful activity). And, yes, a proper review of the Misuse of Drugs Act is overdue and would be welcome (but don't hold your breath). But describing UK policy as a 'failed war on drugs' is neither balanced or illuminating.

Finally, I think the blanket use of 'war on drugs' does more to conceal than to expose the worst abuses that are committed in its name internationally. Back in the early 1930s, the Communist International coined the term 'social fascism' to reflect its belief that there was no significant difference between social democracy and fascism, because both shared a corporatist economic model and stood in the way of full-blooded communism. As a result, it resisted the emergence of popular fronts against fascism until the mid-1930s. Something not dissimilar happens when the 'war on drugs' is used as an antonym for legalisation. It is important never to forget that there is a world of difference between a drug rehabilitation requirement and a death sentence and between NICE approved drug treatment and being chained to a bed.