

An arc of triumph?

Drugs is an issue the government generally likes to side-step at election time. It's a complex subject mired in pitfalls and booby traps. There are easier ways to score political points.

But how is drug policy regarded at the highest political levels? Looking at what goes on between ministers and their political advisers since the 1980s, it is just about possible to trace what might be called an 'arc of engagement' around drug policy.

Starting with the very first international conferences about drugs at the turn of the 20th century right up to the mid 1980s, the UK (along with most other nations) was in *aspirational* mode – the view that drugs was simply a law and order issue that could be easily dealt with by the enforcement agencies.

But in the late 1980s, when it was realised that this wasn't working too well, the next phase was *escalation* – more law enforcement. In 1985, the maximum penalty for trafficking in Class A drugs was raised from 14 years to life and we signed up to the 1988 UN Convention which obliged signatories to take a tougher stance against all aspects of the illegal drug trade.

There was every sign the UK was about to succumb to the ravages of HIV. This tripped another phase, which might be called the *pragmatic* or *realistic* phase when it was agreed that enforcement alone couldn't solve the 'drug problem'. We needed a public health response as well – not least to stop the spread of HIV to the general population.

This phase carried on into the 1990s under the auspices of the Conservative Tony Newton, when he was Secretary of State for Health. He proposed a much broader-based drug policy, which linked enforcement, public health, treatment and prevention – from central to local government. This arrangement led to the publication of the first comprehensive drug strategy, *Tackling Drugs Together*.

It is possible that if the Conservatives

had remained in power, policy would have moved to the next phase, which in some countries was reform and others, a reaffirmation of aspiration through symbolic gestures – as the UN itself did in 1998 with the ten year strategy slogan, 'A Drug Free World – We Can Do It'.

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With the advent of New Labour, we reversed back up the arc to a period of *aspiration*. Although the Conservatives' drug policy infrastructure was adopted wholesale by the incoming government, Tony Blair put drugs close to the top of his political agenda. He firmly believed he could make huge strides in tackling the link between drugs and crime with a massive injection of cash into the treatment system. So in 1998, we got Labour's new 10 year drug strategy, *Tackling Drugs – To Build A Better Britain*. Performance targets were set, a drug czar was installed and the hares were running.

Unfortunately, it soon became apparent that simply setting targets did not guarantee results: by the time the drug czar was talking down the targets, aspirational had become a dirty word. Government just had to hunker down, and whatever came out of the political megaphone aimed at the public, drug policy was now firmly mired in the *pragmatic*.

Then, in 2004, came our brief flirtation with the *reform* phase, with the reclassification of cannabis. But once the tide of political and media opprobrium had swept this away, drug policy became stalled in the next phase along our arc – *symbolism*, where it has remained ever

since. Essentially, much of the public discourse on drugs has been reduced to arguments about the classification system and the messages this transmits.

So why is it so hard? Chiefly because many areas of drug policy are seemingly impervious to government action.

The recent Blueprint drug education initiative underpins the difficulty of proving the effectiveness of drug education in schools. If the enforcement agencies were having consistent and penetrating success at reducing drug importation and dealing on the streets, it is unlikely they would now be reframing their activities as more broad-based 'harm reduction'.

The manifest complexities of the 'condition' known as addiction go far beyond the simplistic medical models whose shortcomings invariably result in apparently poor 'cure' rates. Can the government take much credit for more positive developments like the overall stabilisation of drug use? Most recreational drug use is driven by fashion linked to availability. Perversely, it could be that the reason young people seem to be smoking less cannabis is to titrate the dose of the stronger cannabis now so prevalent in the UK.

One of the areas where the results of government action are clearly demonstrable is in public health and the well-being of the individual user. Needle exchange, methadone and naloxone provision keep alive many of those who otherwise would never have had the chance to recover. Not exactly a vote-winner, however.

So where do we go from here? It is unlikely that drug policy will feature at the top of any incoming government's political agenda. There may well be changes to the policy infrastructure and its agencies, but whether this sends us back up the arc of engagement or we carry on with public-facing symbolism underpinned by pragmatism, you'll have to watch this (Head) space.