



Baroness Molly Meacher

Events worldwide prompted Baroness Meacher to try to move the drug law reform debate on in the UK. Interview by **Harry Shapiro**

How and why did your All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Drug Policy Reform come about?

It came about because we decided there was a need for a global debate on drug policy, that this country was never going to move unless there was a wider move towards reform and we therefore organised an international meeting in Parliament in November 2011 attended by members of the Global Commission on Drug Policy including a former President, also Ministers and ambassadors from nine Latin American Countries and five European Countries. That seems to have played some small part in stimulating the Latin American initiative by the countries that were actually at our meeting, most particularly Mexico, Colombia, Guatemala, and Uruguay. And then it seemed as we began to organise that meeting that we needed a status. We had an informal group of 30 peers which was established in February 2010. In February 2011, we created this APPG so that the international meeting was being organised by an APPG (with Release and other NGOs) rather than just 30 peers.

There have been developments worldwide and various countries have unilaterally instituted reform to a greater or lesser extent. But as you have just said in this country, neither this government nor the last (apart from the blip around cannabis reclassification), have even engaged in the debate, let alone been open to any ideas of change. Recent reports including the Home Affairs Select Committee report and others, have just been dismissed.

But I believe we may be at the tipping point. Paul Flynn asked a question at Prime Minister's Question Time about drug policy and the PM replied that on legal highs we need to look carefully at the evidence on what will work best. Now you can say, 'so what?' but actually we have a perspective on this and we believe that legal highs are a non-toxic way into a reform of drug policy. That's why we did our inquiry into legal highs. All our witnesses said you can't look at legal highs without looking at all the drugs because most of the legal highs are substitutes for cannabis or ecstasy. So will the government engage? We

have a coalition government and the Liberal Democrats are very much on side. Having got our report out with very clear recommendations we feel we now have a policy platform. Now we can engage with the politicians and this is what we are going to do over the next period and what I hope we can achieve, and I am not completely pessimistic about it, is a cross-party initiative on drug policy, because this is not a party political issue nor should it be.

We have a drugs minister who is a Liberal Democrat. Have you had any hint that he is willing to engage in this in any way?

Well, let's put it this way, Nick Clegg as Leader of the Liberal Democrat Party has certainly indicated that there is a need for a review of drug policy. That's important. I don't think the Labour Party will move unless it's on a cross party basis. But according to the journalist Ian Birrell, the cabinet has been discussing its stance and he thinks that it makes sense for the Tories to embrace reform as some Republicans in the States are now doing. He used to be a speech writer for David Cameron. There is an awareness

that there is a shift of opinion across the Western world, I'm not talking about Russia or the Far East, but in Europe and the US. So let's not assume that nothing will happen in the next few years.

OK, but thinking about this issue in terms of 'tipping points', the point at which government is willing to engage in the subject of reform, In South America, clearly for the Colombians, the tipping point is that the violence they experienced is now hitting countries in Central America prompting some serious and very understandable discussion about reform across the whole region. The situation is very different for us in the UK.

In this country, there are two factors which could contribute to bringing about a tipping point. One is the squeeze on funding and the other is the views of young people on drugs. There is also general public opinion. I think the Transform poll is interesting (see page 4). The fact is that a majority of people would support either decriminalisation or legalisation of cannabis. Parliamentarians of all political parties have always been terrified of being soft on drugs, now if you at least did something about cannabis, you would be seen as responding to public opinion. I went to a meeting recently at an Oxford college where after a show of hands, all but three thought our views on reform were correct.

But if you took that argument say to a WI meeting in Gloucester, you wouldn't get the same show of hands, would you?

No. But I'm talking about young people. If political parties want to appeal to young people then they need to start thinking about some of these things, because at the moment they seem really out of touch.

But in this country, we have a particularly voracious tabloid press and I am wondering whether for politicians, the views of young people will trump say *The Daily Mail*.

Except the Transform poll did refer to *Daily Mail* readers in an interesting way.

Daily Mail readers are much more open to reform than you would think and that could be a serious tipping point. And in relation to that, we published our report on 14th January. And since then there have been three full page articles in the *Daily Mail*. Yes, they misquoted me spectacularly and made me look a complete idiot, but the third of those articles looked at Tim Hollis' evidence to our Inquiry and quoted him extensively and I thought for *Daily Mail* readers to read all this from a very senior police officer about drugs and how useless it is to just to keep banning one drug after another was a very useful. So I ask myself, 'Is something significant happening?'

Looking at your report, in essence you are saying that legal highs should be made safer for young people to use. But all the statistics for drugs are on the way down and successive governments have made smoking in public next to impossible and are trying to curb binge drinking. So doesn't your plan go against those trends in public health?

My understanding is that the main fall has been in cannabis use in the last few years, but over the same period there has been a spectacular rise in the use of legal highs. And that is not a good thing. We should not be celebrating a reduced use of cannabis, if all that is happening is that people are using something even less understood, more dangerous.

One of your recommendations was for the Temporary Class Drug Orders to be renamed Drug Supply Control Orders. Can you explain that?

The good thing about the temporary banning orders as they are called, is that they do not criminalise the user. So if you extend that out, if there is a really dangerous legal high, OK ban it until you understand what's going on – don't automatically after 12 months put it into the Misuse of Drugs Act and criminalise the user. And just giving the ACMD a year to consider it is nothing like long enough. The ACMD told us that they can only look at two or three drugs in a year anyway and most of these will take much longer to get to the bottom of. So a year was just plucked out of the air

and doesn't make any sense. And just banning these anyway, only stimulates the development of a whole lot of new ones.

But surely Government can just take the view, 'we will just keep adding these new drugs to the Misuse of Drugs Act'. What's the problem?

The problem as we saw it, was that by doing this, all you are doing is potentially putting more and more people through the criminal justice system which is crazy. If the police stop somebody with a white powder, neither the person nor the police know what it is. As Tim Hollis from ACPO said, this is a mess for the police; the law is effectively unenforceable. So we have to sort this out; we need a review of the Misuse of Drugs Act and we need sensible policies around legal highs. If you had some kind of legal ecstasy-type drug available, properly labelled about dosage with information about drinking water and so on, it would be much, much safer. So we would want to see these drugs put in a lower class D and regulated.

But as we saw with mephedrone, some people were switching to using it because it was 'purer' than amphetamine or cocaine and has since caused numerous problems which suggests that purer does not equal safer. If you had in effect, government sanctioned recreational drugs and somebody died, you can imagine the uproar.

Which is why the New Zealand government is proposing that it should be the manufacturer that has to prove the relative safety of the product, produce all the information about possible side effects and harms, present this to government via the ACMD for a rationale scientific decision about classification and not one driven by political fear of public opinion. The process would be like any other medicine. The pharmaceutical company has borne all the cost, you get a product made here rather than in China. The whole market would change.

To download the APPG report on legal highs go to www.drugpolicyreform.net