

Crime was always the lens through which the Labour government viewed drug policy. This focus led to a massive expansion of investment in drug treatment and the merging of this sector with the criminal justice system. The question now is whether these measures succeeded – and whether they can continue.

Labour in opposition had identified drugs as the cause of crime that they could afford to be tough on. Back in 1994, Tony Blair declared that half of all property crime was caused by ‘drug addicts’. This mythical figure has been repeated so often that it has become an unchallenged assumption.

When looked at more closely, it crumbles to dust. Its source is found in studies and anecdotal viewpoints of the proportion of arrestees who are drug users. Both the studies and the anecdotes ignore that police officers are not creating a random sample of offenders. They tend to pick out the easiest people to arrest. These are the poor, the dishevelled, the recidivist and the obviously intoxicated people who become the ‘usual suspects’.

The resulting figures conflict with decades of criminological research that shows that the majority of street level offenders are teenagers who move quickly in and out of crime. There is a smaller population of people who continue to offend into their 20s and beyond as social exclusion and dependent drug use close off all other avenues to them. But it is highly unlikely, as politicians of all main parties have claimed, that drugs are the principal cause of crime.

This was recognised by the man who developed much of New Labour’s early drug policy. In 1994, Justin Russell wrote that “drug addiction and crime may both be symptoms of a deeper underlying social instability, which can only be tackled by strategies targeted at the root causes of social deprivation”. He also argued that drug treatment agencies should play up the drug-crime link in order to win more funding for effective services.

When he later became special adviser to Prime Minister Blair, he was able to put this into action, with the support of Mike Trace at the new Anti-Drug Coordination Unit. Money started to flow into the sector like water into a thirsty camel. Treatment agencies which had survived through the height of the AIDS panic with a central funding initiative of £17.5 million were to see annual spending rise to over half a



THE BLAIR EXPERIMENT

Alex Stevens looks at Labour’s record on using drug treatment to combat crime.

billion pounds. As the National treatment Agency’s chief Paul Hayes has repeatedly reminded us, this money would not have been available for the expansion of life-saving services if it had not been for the idea that drug treatment cuts crime.

Not only was the funding increased, but the shape of the sector was changed. Agencies who had maintained a careful distance from the police – the people who tended to lock up their clients – were pushed into partnership. This happened initially via the Drug Treatment and Testing Order (DTTO) and then by the Criminal Justice Intervention Programme (later called the Drug Intervention Programme, or DIP).

More and more people were directed into treatment from courts and police stations. In the early years, there were

blockages in the system. In 2002, I interviewed a drug worker in Kent who had just had to refuse a methadone prescription to a pregnant woman who had been injecting heroin into her neck. She wanted to stop, but all the treatment slots had been reserved for DTTO clients. As the system expanded, waiting times came down for all types of clients, although the Drugs Act 2005 and the subsequent expansion of DIP under the Tough Choices programme has tended to swamp agencies in some areas with recreational cocaine users who test positive at arrest and then have to present for a required assessment.

Change has not all been one way. DTTOs and the DIP may have led to the incorporation of criminal justice aims and information sharing in formerly

independent treatment agencies. But treatment has also invaded the prisons, with a long-delayed scaling up of opiate substitution. The transfer of prison healthcare to the NHS, the DIP aim for continuity of care, and successful legal challenges by prisoners who had been denied adequate treatment, all contributed to this rapid, recent development through the Integrated Drug Treatment System (IDTS).

There is now little doubt that people who enter drug treatment do tend to cut their offending, as well as reduce their drug use. My own research suggests that this is also true for people who enter treatment through the courts. But has this cut crime overall? Crime has indeed fallen since the advent of DIP. However, according to the British Crime Survey, it was falling faster before DIP began. Crime has fallen fastest in areas with more intensive DIP interventions. But given that these areas were chosen precisely because they had high crime rates, these reductions towards the average may well have occurred without DIP.

Labour used results of drug treatment outcome studies to demonstrate reductions in crime. Neither of these studies (NTORS and DTORS) were randomised; a mistake that has been repeated in the current study of the IDTS. Without randomisation, it is impossible to say whether the reductions observed are caused by the treatment. Other research, which did not fit the government narrative of crime reduction so well, was effectively censored or left to gather dust on Home Office shelves. Examples include the evaluation of the drug court pilots in Leeds and west London, as well as the independent evaluation of DIP itself.

TONY BLAIR DECLARED THAT HALF OF ALL PROPERTY CRIME WAS CAUSED BY 'DRUG ADDICTS'. THIS MYTHICAL FIGURE HAS BEEN REPEATED SO OFTEN THAT IT HAS BECOME AN UNCHALLENGED ASSUMPTION

With a new government in power and a fiscal deficit to deal with, the system constructed under Labour is obviously

Major criminal justice drug initiatives 1998-2010

- 1998** Drug Treatment and Testing Order (DTTO) pilots initiated
- 1999** Enhanced arrest referral announced
- 1999** CARAT services made available in all prisons
- 2000** National roll-out of DTTOs
- 2001** Drug testing pilots begin in 3 sites (testing on charge, Drug Abstinence Orders, Drug Abstinence Requirements, testing on licence)
- 2002** Drug testing pilots expanded to 6 further sites
- 2003** Criminal Justice Interventions Programme (now Drug Interventions Programme) launched
- 2003** Further expansion of drug testing on charge
- 2004** Restriction on Bail pilots begin
- 2005** 'Tough Choices' project launched (test on arrest, roll-out of Restriction on Bail, Required Assessments)
- 2005** DTTO replaced by the Drug Rehabilitation Requirement (DRR)
- 2005** Conditional Cautioning introduced
- 2007** Follow-up Assessments implemented
- 2007** Integrated Drug Treatment System (IDTS) in prisons begins implementation
- 2008** DIP achieves its target to direct 1,000 drug using offenders into treatment each week.
- 2008** Independent evaluation of dedicated drug courts fails to find evidence of crime reduction
- 2009** – Extension of drug test on arrest, Restriction on Bail and initial and follow-up assessments to Wales.
- 2009** Review of DIP leads to changes to the funding model.
- 2009** Establishment of intensive Alternative to Custody pilots.
- 2010** – National Audit Office criticises the lack of evaluation of DIP and DRRs and calls for the development of 'a framework for evaluating value for money'.

under threat. The Conservative Party seems to have forgotten that Margaret Thatcher oversaw the expansion of methadone maintenance and needle exchange to limit the HIV epidemic. Its advisers now have the NTA and harm reduction firmly in their sights.

The new Home Secretary, Theresa May, voted in 2003 for 'mandatory intensive treatment and rehabilitation for young heroin and cocaine addicts'. Nobody from the Conservatives has yet explained how the huge difference in costs between low threshold opiate substitution and intensive abstinence-based treatment is going to be bridged, nor how their aim of creating miraculously drug-free prisons can be achieved.

In anticipation of these assaults, Paul Hayes has been getting his retaliation in first. On the eve of the election, he argued that investment in drug treatment returns £2bn in annual cost savings, mostly through lower crime. The problem is that, even if reductions in crime are a direct result of drug treatment, these savings have not accrued to the government. Labour did not respond to the crime drop by taking money out of the criminal justice system. On the contrary, it poured

cash into a burgeoning prison estate and a civilian-inflated police force.

In its increased investment, the Labour government did the right thing for drug treatment, even if its motives and methods were questionable. But the risk of Labour's partial achievements being unravelled is high. If people in the field can demonstrate and communicate the value of drug treatment, then it is possible that Conservative ministers may reconsider the stance that they took in opposition. Their more criminologically enlightened Liberal Democrat colleagues seem to have persuaded them to put prison building on hold.

The Coalition programme document states that "we will ensure that sentencing for drug use helps offenders come off drugs". Whether this means non-evidence based, expensive compulsory rehabilitation – or more intelligent and cost-effective use of non-intervention, diversion and treatment – remains to be seen.

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