

Bob Ainsworth



In December 2010, former Defence Secretary and Drugs Minister, Bob Ainsworth, astonished party colleagues by declaring his support for a fundamental reform of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971.

In a Parliamentary debate, he advocated a regulated market. He said he felt that the system of strict prohibition had **“built up international criminal organisations that dwarf the mafia,”** and added **“we have not dented the huge apparatus that supplies drugs”**. Here, Ainsworth discusses his tenure in government and his views on how we should move toward a more liberal regime for controlling drugs with Jeremy Sare.

When exactly did you change your views on drugs?

When I became Drugs Minister (2001-3) I held a traditional enforcement-centred view – just a “try harder, be smarter” approach. My views changed in office as a result of talking to people in treatment, in policing and simply reading a lot and thinking about the policy we had.

Can you describe a specific moment as Drugs Minister when you realised prohibition was not working?

One trip to Jamaica was significant to me. I witnessed first hand the failures of the current system and the resultant drug-funded corruption that threatened to create a failed state.

How would you describe the main features of your period in office?

We certainly used the Home Affairs Select Committee, whose membership famously included Chris Mullin and David Cameron, to broaden our support. We also opened the door for heroin prescribing and tried to oblige, encourage, cajole, force the practitioners into accepting it.

By the time I left the job, we had moved the policy a bit toward harm minimisation. We had rowed back from populist Hellowell [former Drug Czar] type of ideas and we parted company with him after introducing more harm reduction, more treatment and reclassifying cannabis from Class B to C.

I was very annoyed when No.10 imposed a target to halve poppy production in Afghanistan on us, because it was a ridiculous ambition. Ultimately it was more of a headache for the Foreign Office.

What was it like working with Keith Hellowell?

The relationship was very difficult. He had been at war with Mo Mowlam for some time and both were pretty bruised by it. At the same time, David Blunkett wrested control of drug policy back to the Home Office and effectively sidelined him. It was part of my job to handle him and see him off without the Government suffering too much political damage. He left a parting shot over cannabis reclassification, but nothing serious.

So what was it that prevented you from revealing your misgivings?

It was because of the collective responsibility you sign up to when in Government. We were making some progressive improvements, but David Blunkett, as Home Secretary, was prevented by Tony Blair and the No.10 machine from going any further. More than anyone, they acted as our brake.

What conversations did you have with colleagues?

A big influence on me was Lewis Moonie (now Lord), a Defence Minister and a doctor, who showed me we should be moving to a properly evaluated response to the drug problem. But I have lost friends in Parliament who are extremely angry and think I am undermining the fight against drugs. They think ‘bear down, press on’ and it will just work. I have had family members who have asked to speak to me because they were so upset with my position.

For parliamentarians, is it less about the rights and wrongs of the issue and more about how their views are perceived?

It is certainly a big part of it, particularly for party leaders. Tony Blair was really not of my view fundamentally and had a pretty conservative take. But David Cameron on the other hand, I'm pretty sure, is a liberal at heart and would be in a private conversation. He only recanted at the point he became Conservative leader because of the inevitable electoral consequences.

The drugs issue can never get to the top of the political agenda like it ought to. We are over-centralised, decisions are made almost exclusively by No.10 and that is a big problem. As a political issue, it is completely parked.

Six months before the speech, you held one of the most senior posts in the cabinet. After the speech, the top of the party were whispering about how you had seemingly lost all sense of reason.

The only bit which annoyed me was the "senior sources" who told the papers I was "irresponsible". The attack dog was unleashed, which in my case was John Mann MP. I know how it works – I used to do it when I was Deputy Chief Whip! I had been liaising with Transform who thought a former Drugs Minister advocating regulation would make the difference. I never had any illusions about that. I knew the system would easily absorb anything I had to say.

There is a policy review within Labour party now.

There is. But don't expect anything. The fact is, Labour has lost power and the purpose of the review is to regain power. The shadow cabinet are simply seeking the platform which will lead us to electoral success, which won't include drugs. So, on this issue, I would say politics is not serving the people.

The British Crime Survey figures show dramatic falls in the last 10-12 years for many drugs, particularly cannabis. So why do Governments take such a hard line rather than champion their successes?

Gordon [Brown] re-classified cannabis, I think, simply because Paul Dacre [Editor of *The Daily Mail*] wanted him to. The political fear about drugs is derived from a lack of knowledge. There are MPs who took some of these substances when they were young – they could bring some wisdom to the public arena, but don't. And then there are MPs and peers who have had family problems and they have some knowledge, albeit hugely distorted by their own personal tragedy.

How are we going to make progress on reforming the policy?

Strip out all this baggage. Have a conversation where we could consider the potential increase in usage which might flow from a more liberal regime. Then we could measure whether the increased harm was equal to the harm caused by the war on drugs, and determine what is the balance of good. If you could have that conversation, then we could work out the correct regulation for heroin, cocaine and cannabis and all the new substances which are being invented every day of the week.

You have advocated an incremental approach rather than a 'big bang'. Could a pilot be set up to test decriminalisation, like we did with cannabis reclassification?

Yes. But there are pilots which we refuse to study and learn from such as decriminalisation in Portugal or heroin prescribing in Switzerland. By the UN Conventions, which we are signatories to, we try and crush these projects rather than study them.

Legal highs are a huge change and a new path to drug use for young people. Do you think the imposition of temporary bans will help reduce use?

I don't know. It is certainly not a bad thing for the law to be able to react more quickly but the basic problem is the lack of logical thought applied overall.

Will you continue to work with Transform?

I have certainly tabled questions and will continue to do so. But I am a constituency MP and I don't want to be the 'Member for Drug Reform'. I have said to many other MPs that when you speak your mind, it's not that bad. You may think you are going to get murdered. My local paper ran a survey; 56 per cent were against and 44 per cent were for my stance. Paul Flynn thinks his independent views on drugs actually add to his popularity locally. The public will give a much more thoughtful response than you ever get from the media or in the House.

Do you think there is much to be optimistic about, for example the Global Commission on Drugs led by George Schulz and several former Presidents?

I still hold an optimistic outlook. Once the regime of prohibition falls, it will collapse like a house without foundations, which is effectively what it is. There is an awful lot going on already signalling change, referendums in California and big changes in policy in Latin America. At some point, somebody must seize the moment and the whole rotten edifice will fall over. We will end up with a proper international debate recognising the current situation is unsustainable. Policy will shift, just like it did with alcohol in the 1930s, and finally it will become a health issue and not simply one of enforcement.

■ **Jeremy Sare** is a freelance journalist.