

COLLISION COURSE

The sensational sacking of Professor David Nutt seems to have come out of nowhere. But the science of drugs and politics have been heading for a showdown since 2001. By Harry Shapiro

It would be no exaggeration to suggest that the dismissal of David Nutt as Chair of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD) has caused one of the biggest crises in drug policy in living memory. Professor Nutt has been accused of going 'off message' and of crossing the line of ACMD protocol by publicly criticising the government's refusal to accept ACMD advice. The government in turn has been accused of riding roughshod over the scientific evidence and then sacking its chief adviser for venting his frustrations.

But speaking to *Druglink*, Dr Les King, who at the time of writing, is one of two other ACMD members to resign, believes the real bone of contention is the habit of government ministers of announcing decisions about drug classification even before the ACMD has presented its recommendations. And according to Dr King, "the rot started back in 2001".

In his new book *The Forensic Chemistry of Substance Misuse*, Dr King reminds us that it was the then-Home Secretary David Blunkett, giving evidence to the Home Affairs Committee (HAC) in late 2001, who announced that the government was proposing to reclassify cannabis down from Class B to Class C. Not because of some epiphany on the relative harms of cannabis compared to other Class B drugs, but prompted by the amount of police time spent dealing with minor cannabis offences.

The HAC included this in its recommendations and the ACMD was asked by David Blunkett to review the evidence. This was the first time that the government had ever announced a proposed classification change in advance of the ACMD presenting its findings. As it happened, this was not contentious: as far back as 1979, the ACMD had made the same recommendation (which at the time was rejected). The ACMD reviewed the evidence and by January 2004 cannabis became a Class C drug.



Prof Nutt: home secretary Alan Johnson lost patience

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The first real flashpoint between the government and its drug advisers came a year later, when David Blunkett's successor Charles Clarke asked the ACMD to reconsider the evidence which had underpinned the reclassification of cannabis. The government had been goaded into another review by the Conservative Party (backed by anti-cannabis campaigners) in the run-up to the 2005 general election. The ACMD concluded there was no evidence, in particular about the risks cannabis might pose to mental health, to recommend a change. It is believed that Charles Clarke was extremely reluctant to follow this advice and it was partly under threat of resignations from the ACMD that stayed his hand.

That same year, the ACMD was not formally asked to review the government proposal, in the new Drug Act 2005, to classify magic mushrooms a Class

A drug. Instead, then-ACMD Chair Michael Rawlins was said to have been "consulted". Even so, both the letter and the spirit of the Misuse of Drugs Act – which stipulates that the government consults the ACMD on any legislative changes – had been breached.

In 2006 the ACMD received a mauling at the hands of the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee in its report *Drug Classification: making a hash of it*. However, in the light of recent events, it was ironic that among the charges levelled at Council members were that they were not independent enough from government and should be more public and transparent.

And so to the summer of 2007 and Gordon Brown's very early public statement as Prime Minister that he intended to reclassify cannabis back to Class B. The ACMD was sent off to examine the evidence once again. While it could have been forgiven for thinking it was wasting its time, the ACMD produced a very thorough review, which concluded cannabis should be Class C. The advice was ignored and cannabis returned to Class B in January 2009. The Council's recommendation to reclassify ecstasy was given similarly short shrift.

Neither Dr King nor Professor Nutt would argue against the idea that it is the government's prerogative whether or not to accept the views of its independent advisers. But as things stand, the political direction of travel raises serious questions about the drug classification system and the role of the ACMD.

Any recommendation to control or upgrade a drug is accepted, while anything else slams into the political buffers. This was not what the architects of the Misuse of Drugs Act had in mind when Home Secretary Jim Callaghan said back in 1970 that the new Act, "will provide for changes to be made in the classification in the light of new scientific knowledge".