

THE FAILURES OF PROHIBITION

THAT DISRAELI made a record-breaking five hour speech in Parliament on a mixture of brandy and opium pills; that Gladstone preferred to sustain himself on a volatile cocktail of ether, sherry and eggs; that modern politicians often rely on various combinations of mind-altering substances to soldier on through (often night-long) parliamentary duties — all this is of little consequence in today's emotive and frequently irrational debate about drugs.

Is there any other issue so likely to evoke bizarre contradictions among politicians, from the conservative who favours massive state-intervention to deal with a problem which smacks of overly successful capitalist enterprise, to the socialist ready to countenance restriction of civil liberties and inordinate powers for the police in order to stamp out 'the great evil' of drugs? Merely to suggest that prohibition has certain adverse side-effects and so should be up for review provokes a torrent of vituperative condemnation — as I know to my cost.

The very word 'prohibition' should warn us of some of the reasons why the current 'war on drugs' is failing. Just as in the era of alcohol prohibition in the USA, it is a cruel irony that those who call for a switch to an effective policy should be labelled 'soft on drugs'. When present policies stop just an estimated five per cent of illegal drug imports, and have, it's thought, made drugs the second biggest component of illegal world trade after armaments, is it being 'soft' to despair of politicians who do nothing but demand more of the same?

This irrationality is compounded by many drug warriors' firm defence of the right to advertise mind-altering substances on television, and their outrage at suggestions of banning sports sponsorship used to promote a product whose consumers die in their thousands.

The same pillars of society cannot see why it is odd to castigate as a sinner and criminal the youngster who smokes a joint of cannabis as a relaxation from a life where father spends much of his pay packet in the pub, and mother has a long-term tranquilliser prescription.

At the 1987 general election, the major parties seemed to differ little on the question of drug abuse. The Alliance just gave it a passing mention in a leaflet on health. Labour's manifesto was equally silent, but the topic figured strongly in our document on crime prevention. Castigation of the Tories was followed by a catalogue of law and order responses. The Conservatives, not content with asserting that "the battle against drugs can... be won", came

Internationally and in Britain the drugs issue is still in the domain of consensus politics. But Labour MEP Carole Tongue believes it's time to stop the comforting 'drug war' rhetoric and start a radical review of the failures of prohibition.

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remarkably close to suggesting they were winning it. They even suggested their prevention campaign "is encouraging a strong resistance to hard drugs amongst teenagers", which will have been news to teenagers, parents, and everyone actually working in the field.

Where do we go from here? How do we get policy-makers, opinion-formers, and the general public, to at least see the need for a critical look at present policy? Given the multi-national nature of the problem, how do we move towards a sensible harmonisation of policies, even just at a European level? How do we stimulate a major re-think about our society's materialist and competitive ethos — a society where many people cannot keep body and soul together and look for escape in a multitude of mind-altering substances?

We must create a humane policy that does not criminalise use nor undermine basic liberties

It will not be easy. The European Parliament recently established a committee on drug problems which heard numerous experts and gathered much evidence. The majority then proceeded to ignore everything that did not conform with the prevailing consensus that the 'war on drugs' is the only way forward and that we need more of the same. A minority of us argued for a study of the differing legal systems; for a look at the side-effects of law enforcement; and for de-criminalisation of cannabis to be considered.

Our suggestion that a review of a failing approach was required was first ignored and then — when we broke tradition and submitted a minority report — ridiculed. This is not difficult to understand, given the level of public hysteria whipped up by some of our unthinking and irresponsible media. To argue for a change that might appear to sanction use of hitherto illegal substances is far from easy for a politician who wishes to be re-elected.

Politicians have a lot to learn from those who cope daily with the devastation wrought by drugs. We should salute some of their courageous pragmatism rather than reinforce the atmosphere that forces them to keep the tricks that work hidden, meaning they must be painfully re-invented in isolation.

A paradigm example is the whole 'harm-

reduction' approach. The mother who lets her teenage child smoke cannabis at home should be recognised as helping to lessen the risk of contact with more harmful drugs. Ironically, the current debate about supplying clean needles has not been prompted by concern about the risks faced by injecting drug users using dirty needles, but by sudden panic about what 'we' — respectable citizens — might catch from those drug users who pay for their habit by prostitution.

The importance of another strategy for reducing harm must be tragically apparent to one member of the present Cabinet. It was neither heroin nor alcohol alone that killed Olivia Channon, but the mixture. We must accept that educating potential and actual drug users about this lethal truth is not promoting drug use, but increasing the chances that the user will survive to be helped by other measures.

It is also time we had the courage to say that the move away from maintenance prescribing for long-term heroin addicts has been a disaster for many. It has helped neither society at large, nor the individuals concerned, that Dr Dally has been barred from helping people contain their addiction within a stable, law-abiding lifestyle.

Let us be clear, however, that harm-reduction is not a substitute for but a complement to the major goal of use-reduction. The strategy for achieving this must include a reduction in distribution. There is disturbing evidence that ever-heavier sentencing has served merely to centralise drug trafficking in the hands of professionals for whom the rewards are so great as to justify the risk, and whose operations are relatively resistant to police penetration. Can we alter the cost-benefit equation for organised criminals, perhaps even through taxation, so they abandon the trade?

There are dozens of questions that need examination once we move away from the comforting rhetoric that belies the current failure. All with an interest should be demanding that every national government in Europe organises public hearings or enquiries to hear evidence from academics, users, professionals, families and others in order to open up the debate and assess the harm done to individuals and society by all drugs, be they opiates, cocaine, alcohol, tobacco, amphetamines or solvents.

A GENERATION of young people are now facing social problems not seen since the 1930s. Continuing to throw them into the criminal pot with drug barons shows a gross lack of understanding of our young people and the problems they face. We must create a humane drugs policy that does not criminalise use nor undermine basic civil liberties or human rights. We must create an approach that does not depend on 'war', or we risk losing not only the campaign against drug abuse, but our liberties too. □

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