



Labour: the drugs

Labour's record on drugs since 1997

MIKE HOUGH, DIRECTOR OF THE INSTITUTE FOR CRIMINAL POLICY RESEARCH

On tackling drug-related crime, credit where credit is due. Labour have consistently pursued the treatment route – and invested in this heavily – where they could have placed more emphasis on imprisonment. As for coerced treatment in practice, the balance is now tilting too far towards coercion and away from treatment. Labour's record on the cannabis legislation is lamentable. They resisted reclassification when the Runciman report was published; they went for it when the popular mood seemed to change; and they back-peddled furiously when the public – or, more accurately, the press – changed their minds again. Most people are now totally confused about the legal status of cannabis.

Tony's poor listening skills have resulted in a failure to attend to advisors and he is heading for permanent exclusion if his performance doesn't improve next term

DANNY KUSHLICK, DIRECTOR OF THE TRANSFORM DRUG POLICY FOUNDATION

An extract from Labour's End of Term Report Card
Subject: Drug Policy
Result: FAIL

- Consistent failure to listen to expert advisors in any area of drug policy
- Failure to conduct an impact assessment of prohibition
- Failure to act on Home Affairs Select Committee (HASC) recommendations
- Failure to publish No 10 Strategy Unit drug policy scoping document
- Pre-election populism in publishing the Drugs Bill and support for drug testing in schools
- Congratulations due on reclassification of cannabis and robust defence of attacks from International Narcotics Control Board

Summary: All in all a very poor report. Tony is hanging with a bad crowd, particularly his

transatlantic buddies. His poor listening skills have resulted in a failure to attend to advisors and he is heading for permanent exclusion if his performance doesn't improve next term.

BILL PUDDICOMBE, CHIEF EXECUTIVE OF PHOENIX HOUSE

Labour have taken many positive and radical steps in constructing a rounded UK response to drug misuse. Central to that has been the concentration on treatment as a way forward and the substantial, unprecedented investment in services. The recent narrow concentration of resources on offenders has had the desired effect but has limited the impact of the strategy. We have not gained as much ground in other areas, particularly working with young people, as a result of the narrow focus.

PETER MARTIN, CHIEF EXECUTIVE OF ADDACTION

Labour record so far has been fairly good. The commitment right from the very top, from Tony Blair and his cabinet, has made it work. However there are some places where it doesn't join up. I think the tackling crime agenda is necessary although I am a little sad that the lion share of resources is going to that, which leaves a gap for people who want to enter treatment voluntarily. Labour makes an artificial divide between drugs and alcohol. This is nonsense. Alcohol is a drug and what we are seeing now is a lifestyle which includes drugs and alcohol.

VICTOR ADEBOWALE, CHIEF EXECUTIVE OF TURNING POINT

Labour have been willing to engage and be more solution-focussed, tackling things head on. I think you have to give them credit for that. The reclassification of cannabis, controversial and difficult for some, has told some truth about drugs and in a way that needed to be told: cannabis is not a health supplement nor is it as dangerous as heroin or crack or cocaine. They have focussed on things like waiting times – the idea that we can address access to treatment – and there has been a significant increase in funding. The treatment sector has been brought in on a regular basis to debate with ministers as to what is happening on the streets, which is useful.

I have attended at least two meetings at No 10 with the Prime Minister on this which indicates it is a high agenda issue. Tony Blair has gone a bit beyond the 'just say no' message which we all know had problems.

THE JURY



MIKE HOUGH
Director of the Institute for Criminal Policy Research



DANNY KUSHLICK
Director of the Transform Drug Policy Foundation



BILL PUDDICOMBE Chief Executive of Phoenix House



PETER MARTIN Chief Executive of Addaction



VICTOR ADEBOWALE Chief Executive of Turning Point



JAMES KAY
Chairman of Healthwise

test

How has Labour performed in the drugs field since being elected eight years ago? What would you like to see happen by the end of the government's drug strategy in 2008? And what major issues will the drugs field be facing in 2008? We put three questions to six experts

JAMES KAY, CHAIRMAN OF HEALTHWISE

There is nothing that you can say that they have achieved driven by central government, they have been involved in lots of stuff but the energy and creativity has come from the bottom up, not from the government. Over the last two years a lot of funding has been pulled from local authority's support for drug education. The Blueprint drug education programme has become very, very important for Labour. Although some of the nastiest bits of Blueprint have been removed in practice through their application, it still rests, it seems to me, on the deliberate promotion of intolerance, which shouldn't be an educational objective. The best we can do is make sure that young people understand the nature of the risks involved in taking drugs and how to minimise those and to know when things are going wrong. They have failed to grapple with harm reduction in the educational world.

What would you like to see happen by 2008

MIKE HOUGH

Drug dependency is not the only driver of crime. Over the next three years I would like a much strengthened probation service – and their partners – tackle offenders' drug problems in tandem with other problems – such as those related to mental health, literacy, employment and housing. It would be good to see some clarity in government policy towards cannabis.

DANNY KUSHLICK

- Drugs Bill scrapped after outcry from field
- DrugScope call for legalisation and regulation of all drugs
- Evidence-based impact assessment of Drug War expenditure
- Dutch-style coffee shops and consumption rooms with resident dealers open in UK
- In line with HASC recommendation, UK initiates discussion at the UN on legalisation of drugs
- Licit drugs included in UK Drug Strategy and focus shifted to non-problematic users
- Green paper published outlining Government's plans to move responsibility for drugs from Home Office to Department of Health
- National Audit Office conduct audit of effectiveness of treatment provision
- Global agreement to end drug crop eradication
- Large-scale heroin prescribing programme rolled out across UK
- *News of the World* and *Daily Mail* declare the Drug War lost
- Pigs fly

BILL PUDDICOMBE

The most important step to take next is to shape services according to outcomes. That means collecting proper data about what works and then digging further to discover why. If we can do this then we will create responses that will stand the test of time – as is the case with well-researched modalities such as residential treatment and peer support. Drug treatment will become a demonstrable agent of positive social change.

PETER MARTIN

I would like to see the hidden harm agenda really taken forward. That would be the one thing for future generations. I would like to see less of a lip service commitment to the voluntary sector. Government makes a lot of saying that the voluntary sector are partners, is doing good work, is value for money and all the rest of it, but most of the budget goes to the statutory sector where change is a very slow process. I want to end our over reliance on methadone and try other responses such as prescription heroin, naltrexone and subutex. I want to banish the current reaction to the idea of rehabilitation. We are not a lefty wishy-washy liberal brigade: rehabilitation is tougher than prison because people are facing up to their fears, facing up to their friends who are dealing drugs and that is a very courageous thing for people to do. I would like to see more understanding of what addiction is; the compulsiveness of it, the loss of control.

The energy and creativity has come from the bottom up, not from the government

VICTOR ADEBOWALE

I want a credible and equal balance between criminal justice and community responses to drug use. I am still concerned about the growing number of stories I am hearing of people committing crime to access treatment. I would like to see some forward planning. What I mean by that is I think that Khat is going to be an issue in this country and I wouldn't want to see it take services by surprise. I think that just because it is in the Somali community doesn't mean that it isn't an issue. It may be getting into the headlines in five, ten years from now so we need to be thinking about it now. I think we do need to do something about treatment for crack. I know there is a number of advisory and steering groups but we need to push the envelope on what is credible treatment and certainly we struggle to maintain some residential crack services and that seems to me to be a little odd given that everyone seems to be very concerned about this drug. I think that the most important thing in terms of the future strategy is that we now know that the issue of substance misuse is not isolated; is not isolated from

mental health, is certainly not isolated from alcohol. What I would like to see is a much more integrated substance misuse policy. Simply dealing with drugs because they are illegal and not dealing with them in combination with alcohol won't wash. Treatment needs to be able to cope with illegal drug misuse, legal drug misuse and mental health. I would like to see a chain of substance misuse detox centres so that poor people can get access to at least a first detox as a start. A lot of people who take drugs do not break the law but we need to deal with those people as seriously as those who do.

JAMES KAY

There are some amazing gaps in drug education, gaps which are obviously easy to plug like dealing with first aid issues. How come there isn't a standard curriculum that teaches young people how to deal with overdose? You ask any 15 or 16-year-old if they have been with a friend when they have suddenly sparked out and they can't wake them up, and they almost always say 'yes'. I want active promotion of effective survival skills for young people in this world saturated as it is by alcohol and other form of drug use.

What do you think will happen by 2008

MIKE HOUGH

The Government will continue down the coerced treatment route. They will continue to invest in surveillance and testing of offenders at the expense of mainstream treatment services. The capacity of the probation service to respond more holistically to offenders' problems will be progressively eroded through the introduction of National Offender Management Service (NOMS). On cannabis, Labour will run away from the issue as hard as they can.

DANNY KUSHLICK

- Utter failure of UN and UK ten-year drug strategies
- Rising tension at UN as progressive reforming member states battle with faith-based orthodoxy
- Continuing property crime in connection with fundraising and a consequent rise in the prison population
- Continuation of faith-based principles as opposed to an evidence-base as guiding force behind policy
- Haemorrhaging of best workers in the drugs field as criminal justice orientation of drugs initiatives lowers morale to breaking point
- Expansion of coerced treatment as crime reduction initiative fails to significantly reduce prohibition-related crime and violence
- Transform staff and trustees receive death threats from Mafia
- Keith Hellawell and the Hassela Nordic Network receive ten-year service to industry awards from Mafia at ceremony in Las Vegas
- First community care grant awarded for tobacco addict to get into rehab
- Tories call for 100,000 residential rehabilitation places for registered homosexuals

BILL PUDDICOMBE

In 2008 the targets of the strategy will, in all probability, have been met. The problem will be that they refer to the situation in 1998 – and may no longer be as relevant. By 2008 we could be arguing the rights and wrongs of vaccinations against the effects of heroin or cocaine ... or even alcohol. Commentators in the press may even have noticed that things have improved. But perhaps that's too much to ask.

I am worried about the lurch of drug testing in school but it won't go anywhere in the long term because it is just such a daft idea

PETER MARTIN

I think we will make more progress, but I'm just a bit frustrated that government policy is slow to catch up with voluntary sector practice and therefore innovations are held back. Bureaucracy and target setting will continue. I think we will get more use of DTTOs. Agencies, such as social services and probation, will be talking together more and will be trying to actually put the client at the centre of it all. I think we will make progress on this aspect but to what extent I don't know. The *Daily Mail*-driven agenda on drugs like compulsory rehabilitation and drug testing in school is doomed to failure; it is far more complex than that.

VICTOR ADEBOWALE

I can see pretty much more of the same really. I fear that we may have gone as far as we can go in terms of an open debate about what we do about drugs in this country. I think we will return to some of the rhetoric of the 1980s which will be very sad. I think that there may well be more playing to the gallery.

JAMES KAY

I think we have gone past the stage of going back to the super anti-drug stuff in schools. I am worried about the lurch of drug testing in school but it won't go anywhere in the long term because it is just such a daft idea; it is not practical. If it went anywhere you would have the National Union of Teachers up in harms. It is clearly wrong, it comes entirely from the wrong place; complete misunderstanding of what schools are. But we are not going into a Big Brother state. There will be a few cases where it will happen for a while but it won't have much impact. They will come to the astounding conclusion that the only positive things to report about Blueprint are those which are already part of mainstream social education. ■