



Labour's 'eight wasted years'

In 1997, the Labour government inherited the Drug Strategy from the Conservatives and in 2005-06 are pledged to spend £1.5bn. So how can your shadow home secretary David Davies say that we haven't even begun to fight the war against drugs?

We've had eight wasted years under Labour. We now have a million people on hard drugs. The number of young people on hard drugs has increased and so clearly the policies aren't working. I would identify two particular causes for concern.

One is the decision to reclassify cannabis which I believe was a serious mistake: it has sent all the wrong signals and has confused people. The one thing that is vital in dealing with drugs is to have clear messages. You shouldn't confuse people or send conflicting signals. That was a big mistake and we would reverse it.

The second thing is that they may be spending a lot of money, but I'm not sure they are spending it in the right way. To give a specific example: it makes me quite angry that there are fewer than 2,500 intensive residential rehabilitation places in the country. If we are serious about this, and we really want to help people who have got into drugs get back on the straight and narrow and have drug-free lives, we have got to have more residential rehabilitation places. We are pledged to increase them more than ten-fold to 25,000 places [offering] six-month courses. This would mean we could offer a place to every young person on hard drugs and we hope eventually to be able to offer this to adults as well. Matched with that, when people come before the court, we would test them for drugs and if the tests shows that they are on drugs, depending on the seriousness of the offence, but in as many cases as possible, the option of going into residential rehab instead of going to court. And if they did that and stayed the six-month course, they would never go to court for that offence.

But there is a third thing too. We have criticised their policy of making shoplifting a fixed penalty offence – it will be just like a parking ticket. It is likely to make shoplifting the preferred offence for drug users because it would mean that they would never come before the court – and drug users are the sort of people that you would want to get before the court

The war on drugs has had its supply lines cut because Labour has gone soft on cannabis, has failed to invest in residential rehabs and is not getting enough drug offenders in court. Conservative leader Michael Howard talks to **Harry Shapiro**

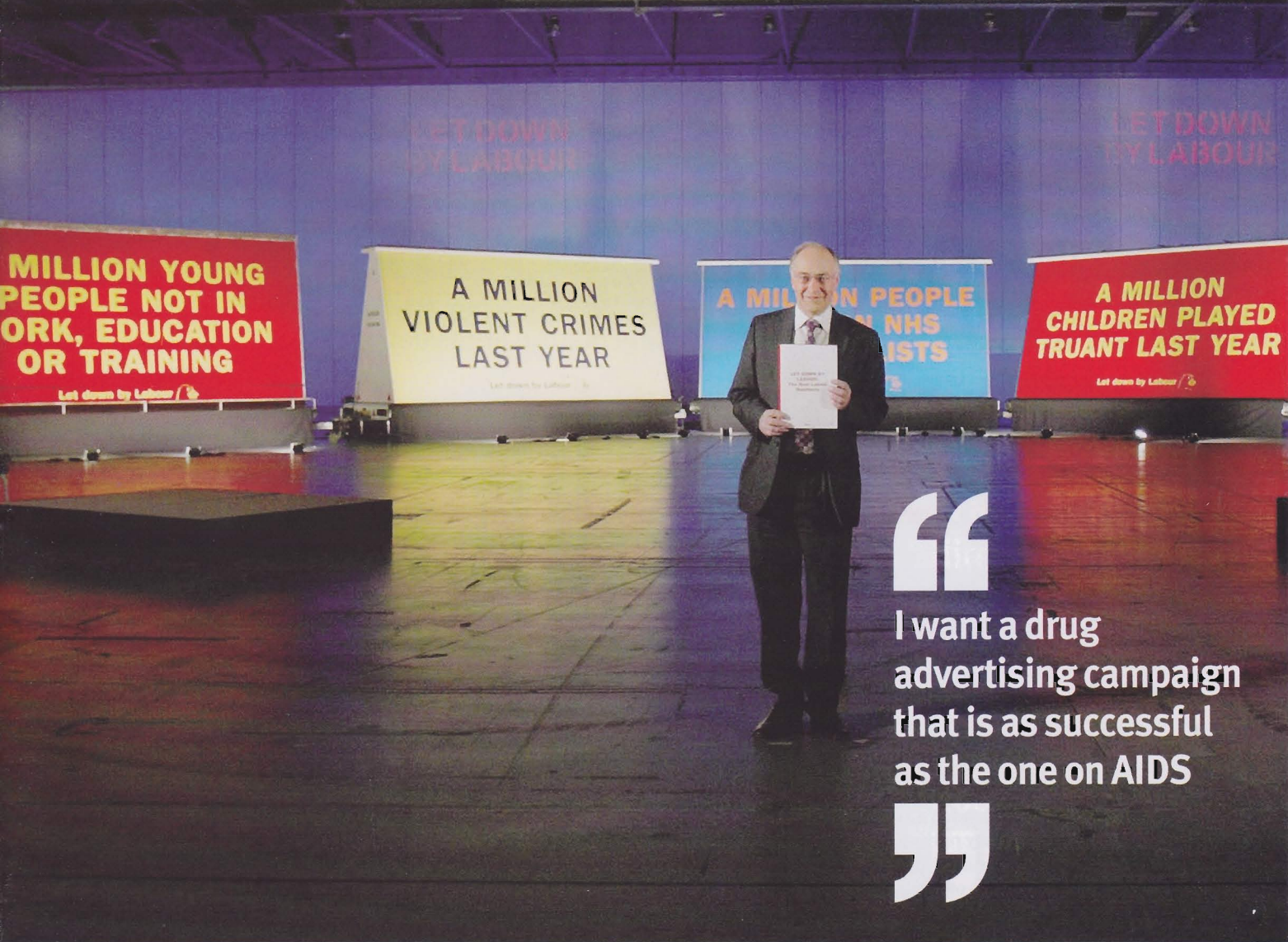
because that gives the court the opportunity to give the person the choice. Yet the government is taking a course of action which will lead to fewer drug users coming before the courts and so fewer will have the opportunity to seek help.

How will you pay for this increase in residential rehabilitation and given the recruitment problems which already exist in this field, how will you encourage people that this is a worthwhile job?

If you make it an integral and central part of your approach to drugs, then I think it would become more important in people's minds, people would start to think about it and you would get more recruits. And how would we pay for it? We have done a very careful exercise called the James Report. We have shown that the government is wasting £35bn a year of taxpayers' money. So we are going to save that £35bn, and of that we are going to re-spend £23bn in different ways from the government and one of those ways is on 25,000 drug rehabilitation places.

One of your commitments was to reduce the amount of paperwork for the police. But this was precisely one of the central rationales for the reclassification of cannabis which you oppose. Surely it is more important that the police spend their time dealing with drugs which cause relatively more harm to society?

It has never been the case that the police were compelled to arrest anybody for cannabis. They always had that discretion. A number of police officers have said that the change hasn't led to a reduction in paperwork that they have to deal with. And indeed the



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government's own scheme envisages that people would be arrested after repeated cautions. So if it meant that, you have got to do the paperwork to record the cautions, so that you are in a position to arrest people.

On the issue of random drug testing in schools, when this was first announced by the government back in February 2004, shadow education spokesman Tim Collins criticised this as “a headline-grabbing exercise”, opposed by many teachers and experts and undertaken without proper consultation. But now you support it?

The government announced it as a scheme that they were going to introduce. We are against that. We are not against head teachers having the option of introducing drug testing if they want to do so, but we are not going to force teachers who don't want to do it. The head teacher can make it compulsory in a school, not the government.

You have also pledged to fund an anti-drug advertising campaign. But the last time this was done was under a Conservative government back in the 1980s with ‘Heroin Screws You Up’, it clearly didn't work. What makes you think this can be made to work?

But back in the 1980s, the government did have an extremely successful campaign about AIDS which saved lots of lives. I want a drug advertising campaign that is as successful as the one on AIDS. There is some evidence from America where drug use appears to be on the decline that clear messages through advertising

can have an effect. So I don't pretend that every advertising campaign works, but I think the AIDS campaign proved that they can work.

So given the success of harm reduction in relation to AIDS and HIV, what is your view on harm reduction as applied to drugs?

I don't think it is a simple read-across. I went to Glasgow and I saw an abstinence project which greatly impressed me. I'm not suggesting there is no place for harm reduction and that you should make all programmes rely on abstinence. But I do think that not enough attention is paid to the success of the abstinence programmes and that they should be given a greater role when it comes to giving out the money. ■

TALKING DRUGS: SHADOW HOME SECRETARY DAVID DAVIS

“No government can be soft on drugs and tough on crime at the same time.”

“An £80 fine does not deter a criminal desperate to get enough money for drugs, especially when a large number of fines are never paid.”

“Labour's acknowledged the damage drugs do, but, typically, their approach has been characterised by broken promises and failed initiatives.”

“Labour's only significant policy on drugs to date has been to declassify cannabis. We have opposed this lunacy and we will reverse it.”

“Some people say we've lost the war on drugs. But Labour haven't even begun to fight it. They have capitulated. Our country deserves better.”