

Making sense of intelligence

Responding to Men in Black, ISDD's Nicholas Dorn says that integrating the voices of the intelligence agencies into the formation of UK drug strategy will be a challenge and opportunity for the new Drug Czar

THE JOB OF ABSORBING MI6 and MI5 into the UK's drug strategy remains incomplete. It also arises mixed emotions. For some observers, no doubt, this trend is unpalatable.¹ But not only is it a *fait accompli*, it also offers an opportunity to improve the overall coherence of drug strategy formation.

It's good for your health!

First, it's necessary to throw a red herring overboard – the suggestion that involvement of intelligence services against trafficking may be incompatible with a policy which includes help for drug users.

Recent history shows that during the 1980s, the Security Intelligence Service moved from episodic anti-supply activities, through the establishment of a capability against money laundering, to regular action against drug supply.

And long before the Security Service's formal 're-tasking' towards organised crime, MI5 was also involved on and off, in response to claims that some Northern Ireland paramilitaries were trafficking drugs.

And yet, as we all know, the 1980s saw an unprecedented expansion in the UK's treatment services. The suggestion that shifting the intelligence community's anti-supply work into the mainstream threatens treatment services doesn't stand up to scrutiny.² Nor do NCIS, Customs and Excise or Regional Crime Squads threaten treatment!

Composite resolution

Intelligence is fundamental to any coherent anti-supply strategy. In order to formulate such a strategy, government departments and other agencies need a global situation report that is accepted by all the key players, the conceptual ability and courage to formulate and stick to priorities, and political backing from the highest level.

1. See for example, Mark Urban's *UK Eyes Alpha*. Faber, 1996. Paradoxically, Urban calls for intelligence to focus on 'questions that most directly concern politicians', going on to refer to the Balkans.

2. Rice G. and Thomas T. 'Men in black.' *Druglink*: 1997, 12(5), p.14-15.

3. Porch D. *The French Secret Services*. Oxford University Press, 1997.

4. Bamford J. *The Puzzle Palace*. Penguin, 1983.

The first of these – 'the intelligence composite' – is the key. For as long as the intelligence agencies remain partially outside the ambit of drug policy coordination, muttering distractingly about their sources but not being properly drawn in nor their work assessed, policy-making remains unnecessarily confused.

The question for government is how to reconcile diverse contributions from a plethora of intelligence and information sources with the government's own need to hold an overall view of the drug situation both at home and abroad.

Tackling Drugs Intelligently

To ask this is to ask what should be the inspiration for cooperation in intelligence matters. There are three basic models.

The UK tradition, in national security matters generally, is for a relatively small central group to synthesise a compromise view of information from diverse intelligence sources. This produces a clear if sometimes bland view, with the rougher edges and contradictions taken out. An application of this to crack in the 1980s illustrates the ability of the UK approach to contextualise and contain apocalyptic warnings from US sources.

The French tradition, by contrast, sees a variety of intelligence agencies 'selling' their diverse views to those parts of the political establishment most likely to accept them.³ This approach can lead to a plurality of competing assessments, and may partly explain a volatility in French policy-making on drugs.

On the one hand, elements of the intelligence establishment which are oriented to the Far East, warn of increased opium production (signalling a need for treatment). On the other hand, warnings of links between political corruption, terrorism and cannabis supply come from those elements focused on North Africa and Islam (indicating a need for repression). And so today, France combines treatment for 'addicts' with strong action against 'dangerous' minorities.

The American tradition is mid-way between these approaches, with the integration of intelligence assessment being strong in theory but weaker in practice.⁴ The US Office of Drug Control, the base of

successive 'Drug Czars', is a useful barometer for the success or otherwise of this system. After a rhetorically powerful start in 1979, under William Bennett, this office drifted sideways. It never achieved any purchase on international affairs, a prerequisite for proactive drug policy-making. Even domestically, it never became more than yet another voice in the mix.

Choices for the UK Czar

Faced with these three models for the use of intelligence in strategy formation, the issue for our Drug Czar will be what strategic intelligence assessment system to follow. Only when this is answered will it be possible to apply the usual management methods to the making and delivery of a drug strategy.

In other words, only on the basis of a focused assessment of the global and regional drug situation can the very diverse and challenging intellectual, political and practical issues be grasped.

For example, how does the UK define its primary cooperation partners? Through common policy objectives (for example, EU Member States), through a consideration of non-drug objectives (Eurasia and the politics of oil), through an ability to deliver in the short term (USA), or through long-term improvements in infrastructure (Africa)?

Then, where should anti-supply policy be targeted? On the home front or elsewhere? Where should the focus lie in the supply chain – near the point of production or the point of retail sale? And should we go primarily for the drugs, the trafficking organisations or their money (the three orthodoxies of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s)?

Ultimately, given the width and heterogeneity within the field for potential action, it is clear that there is a danger not only of a dispersal of efforts, but even of different agencies finding themselves at odds.

Only a tight and inclusive focus for the assessment of strategic drug intelligence can provide the basis for coherent and integrated drug strategy formation. Recent changes and current developments mean that this prize is at least visible, if not yet grasped. ○