

Rough ride for drug czar

The blunt target figures made headline news, but any attempt on the part of Keith Hellawell to discuss the details of the drug policy was effectively sidelined by the fall-out from tabloid drug revelations of the rich and famous, notably England rugby captain Lawrence Dallaglio.

You've been framed

This was the context of much of the media's treatment of the UK anti-drugs coordinator exemplified by BBC2's *Newsnight* fronted by Jeremy Paxman. From the beginning of the programme, the camera angle foretold the line of questioning, as Keith Hellawell was framed from above, looking apprehensive.

Paxman kept coming back to the issue of responsible persons in the public eye taking drugs – gamely Hellawell tried to talk up school programmes and other worthy and neutral topics. Then Paxman put the question: had the drugs czar ever taken an illegal drug? Keith Hellawell said no.

Paxman asked if that was an honest answer. Here Hellawell betrayed his police pedigree, he told Paxman that if he lied, the media were bound to find out anyway. Perhaps he thought that somebody, pretending to sponsor the anti-drug effort, would catch him in an unguarded moment.

Palace revolt

More serious for Hellawell, ministers and officials outside Jack Cunningham's Cabinet Office have apparently distanced themselves from the targets set in the National Plan.

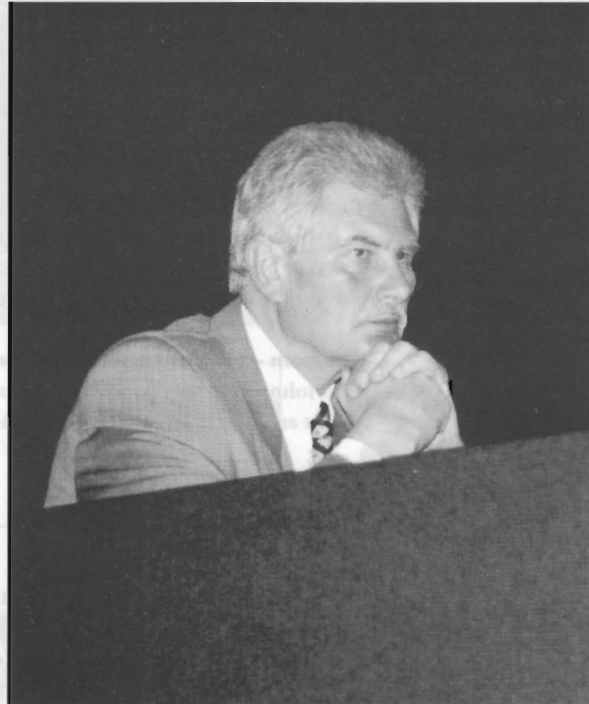
No doubt government departments will happily join in to receive the accolades if, by 2008, the scale of heroin availability and use among young people has been halved. But during the inter-departmental and ministerial consultation period on the report, the sound was more of departing feet.

Keith Hellawell's own departure to Australia gave the first opportunity for some public political backstabbing. *The Daily Express* (2 May 1999) reported that ministers were 'outraged' by the trip. 'If a Government minister did this,' said one unnamed government minister, 'it would be called a junket.'

But this alleged 'outrage' over one trip appeared to have deeper roots. The newspaper report went on that ministers are 'deeply

frustrated by their lack of control over his activities' and quoted, presumably the same unnamed source, as complaining, '... Jack Cunningham, who is nominally his boss, is powerless to do anything about him.'

When he announced the targets in the



House of Commons, the same Jack Cunningham was forced to admit that the government didn't know what the baseline figures were for drug addiction, against which the targets were supposed to be judged. So, as far as the press was concerned, it was the minister, not Keith Hellawell that was standing on shifting sands of credibility.

The Daily Mail declared 'Cunningham plucks figures from the air in abuse crackdown' (26 May) while on the same day *The Independent* snarled, 'Cunningham takes spaced-out trip down fantasy lane.' And here is the crux of why the honeymoon between a non-civil servant anti-drugs coordinator and the government's drug policy may be over.

Over-done and over here?

Politicians do not like to be embarrassed or caught wrong-footed and there is a strong feeling that the targets are unrealistic. The comparison with America is interesting.

The ambitious approach of Keith Hellawell parallels that of the Congress in the United States. For example, Congress pledged to reduce the availability of cocaine, heroin, cannabis and methamphetamine by 80 per cent by the year 2003. This and other similarly grandstanding targets did *not* come from the US Office of National Drug Control (ONDC – roughly the US equivalent of Keith Hellawell's office) provoking them to comment that targets need to be realistic.

But if you examine the 'realistic' targets established by the ONDC, they bear a striking resemblance to those condemned in this country as emanating from 'fantasy land'.

For example on reducing adolescent drug use, the US and UK both announced a 20 per cent reduction in those using in the past month by 2002; on reducing availability the figures are the same over roughly the same time period – 25 per cent (2005) and 50 per cent (2008) for the UK, 2002 and 2007 respectively for the US. If, as is claimed, the UK figures have been plucked from the skies, could they have been taken from US air space?

Whose drug policy is it anyway?

In contrast to the uproar over targets, there is deathly silence on substantial questions about the scope and delivery of the strategy in the UK. The devolution agenda of government was perhaps just too fresh and remains too sensitive for the coordinator to break out of the deep ambiguity that presently characterises a UK drug policy. Short sections on Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland refer to their national drug strategies.

It seems to be agreed that Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales should develop drug



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strategies that are 'within' the UK policy, even though they might each turn out to have their own national characteristics. In this policy area as in others, the lack of a specifically English strategy means that the UK strategy is, implicitly, English. If so, then it is difficult to see how it can be an overarching UK framework.

If Scotland is to have its own drugs enforcement agency, then who will set its priorities? If Northern Ireland is to develop cross-border bodies with the republic, then can the drugs element of these really be seen as an element in a UK (aka English) strategy? Do all the targets apply to all four nations, regardless

of other aspects of their policies? Shuffling of feet and lack of conviction characterise this dimension of the debate. It is to be hoped that next year's report will more adequately address these issues.

The basis of all these difficulties can be traced to the time when the role of anti-drugs coordinator was conceived of and appointed. It should not be forgotten that, at the time the



Prime Minister made his electoral pledge to introduce a drug czar, he was in Scotland. Since then, the devolution debate has become a real issue in drug policy, and poses particular challenges to a 'UK' policy strategy. None of which is helped by the sheer unpredictability of the media/populist mood on drugs, and the capacity of the press to trivialise. These pose enormous problems for the development of a drug strategy that is clear, well thought out and supported by all.

The refraction of the report through drug scandals, queries over the targets, and political difficulties, turned a smooth launch for the *First Annual Report and National Plan* into an exercise in crisis management. Perhaps an inspirational theme song is needed for the strategy. How about 'things could be marvellous'? ■

KLA link to heroin trafficking

Enforcement agencies in Europe and America have identified officers of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) as major international heroin traffickers.

According to the *San Francisco Chronicle* (5 May 1999), on 25 March, the day after NATO began bombing Serb forces, drug enforcement experts from the European Office of Police (Europol) met in a closed session devoted to 'Kosovar Narcotics Trafficking Networks'.

Europol decided to prepare an extensive report for the European Justice and Home Affairs Ministers on the KLA role in heroin smuggling with separate investigations underway in Sweden, Germany and Switzerland.

Balkan experts interviewed by the *Chronicle* confirmed that the Kosovars have gained control of

heroin trafficking in the region. Michel Koutouzis, a senior researcher at the Paris-based Geopolitical Drug Watch said, 'The Kosovars had a 10-year head start on their cousins across the border simply because their Yugoslav passports allowed them to travel earlier and much more widely than someone from communist Albania. That allowed them to establish very efficient overseas networks through the worldwide Albanian diaspora and in the process to forge links with other underworld groups involved in the heroin trade such as Chinese triads in Vancouver and Vietnamese in Australia.'

All of which has been uncomfortable for the British government and their NATO allies. On 21 April, during Prime Minister's Question Time, Labour's Tam Dalyell asked Mr Blair for his assessment of the

Europol report. The PM replied that 'There has been no such report...'

However, by 10 May, having possibly by then seen some documentation on the subject, the government was being more circumspect. On that day in the House of Lords, Lord Kennet asked Baroness Symons of the Foreign Office, whether the government, 'are confident that none of the reports of the [KLA's] association with the drug trade is soundly based; and whether this is the view of the International Narcotics Control Board [INCB] and the United Kingdom and other European police forces'. To which she replied, 'We will take fully into account information available from the INCB and police forces concerned in monitoring developments.'

As reported in *Druglink* back in September 1997, the Balkan

region has been open house for drug trafficking since the fall of communism threw the whole area into political and economic chaos. As new states emerged from the rubble, they had far more important matters to deal with than tightening up border controls and so the 'Balkan Route' for heroin into western Europe flourished.

The outbreak of war required substantial purchases of weapons among those with hardly any of their own currency let alone the wherewithal to pay in hard western currencies such as the US dollar.

But when a kilo of heroin costing around £5000 in Albania can be turned into £20,000 just across the border in Greece, it is hardly surprising that the 'underdogs' in wars such as these, turn to drug trafficking to buy arms.