

The year of living dangerously

Politicians can usually rely on the press to back ‘tough on drugs’ stances. But not always. By Malcolm Dean

In his evidence to the Leveson inquiry into press ethics, former Conservative minister Chris Patten criticised politicians for seeking close relationships with newspaper proprietors saying they had ‘demeaned themselves’ by ‘grovelling’ to the likes of Rupert Murdoch. Arguably, nowhere is this kow-towing more obvious than in the arena of drug policy, and explains much of the reason why most politicians refuse even to engage in the debate about reform, let alone propose changes.

Policy-making is a complex process. I watched it closely for 38 years from a Guardian desk. It’s a tangled mix, of new events, old promises, bureaucratic loyalties, party allegiances, manifesto pledges, pressure group campaigns, think tank and select committee reports, research findings, and legislative cooking time, among other factors. What surprised me during the five years it took me to write my book on the media impact on policy, was the extent of right wing tabloid influence on such emotional social issues as drugs, along with penal and immigration policy, because of the tabloids’ ability to fan public fears and prejudices.

In my recently published book *Democracy Under Attack – how the media distort policy and politics*, the drugs chapter draws a parallel between the influence the tabloid press applies to ministers and the influence Rupert Murdoch applies to his editors. Murdoch does not need to issue daily edicts because his editors know what he wants. Ditto the tabloids and ministers. They know what the tabloids want and too frequently policy is adjusted accordingly.

Just occasionally, however, the politicians get it wrong. In March 2000,

the independent Police Foundation published what became known as the Runciman report, after its Chair, Dame Ruth Runciman. It was the most comprehensive review of drugs legislation for a quarter of a century. Ministers expected the tabloids to treat the report with the vitriol and vilification they traditionally pour over progressive proposals. For once this did not happen.

Ministers were handed a copy of the report at the Home Office on Friday 25 March, three days before its publication on the following Monday. Jack Straw, who was then Home Secretary, informed Ruth Runciman that the government would be unable to introduce its proposals for political reasons. Mo Mowlam, the Drugs Minister, who was also present at the hand-over, did suggest “Don’t you think we should read it first Jack?” Undeterred, Straw and other fellow ministers moved quickly to get their retaliation in first.

There was a run of stories in the Sunday papers rejecting the proposals even before their publication. “Plea for softer drug laws will be thrown out” (*The Sunday Express*), “Drugs hard line stays” (*The Mail on Sunday*), “Government to reject drug law relaxation” (*The Independent on Sunday*). These and other similar press reports were reinforced by Charles Clarke, minister responsible for police matters, on the BBC’s Sunday morning political show, who declared there would be no weakening of penalties because that would “signal taking drugs is OK.”

Following publication, ministers were suddenly thrown onto the back foot. *The Express* noted that ministerial “knee jerk reactions won’t help the police”; *The Mirror* insisted the proposals should be “discussed intelligently and with an

open mind” as did *The Evening Standard*; while *The Daily Mail*, which placed an extract from its editorial in the middle of its front page declaring that “despite this paper’s instinctive reservations over a more relaxed approach to drugs, we believe the issue deserves mature and rational debate.” Most astonishing of all was the response of *The Telegraph*. In an extraordinary editorial, given its previously hard line approach, it proclaimed: “We are moving reluctantly to the view that Dame Runciman is asking the right questions.” In fact the paper went further than the report suggesting the government should draw up plans to legalise cannabis on an experimental basis.

What to do in the face of this unexpected burst of media liberalism? Government spin doctors changed tack, suggesting ministers were taking the report seriously. Jack Straw told *The Observer* there was “a borderline case” for softening the law on ecstasy, but in a column in the hard line *News of the World* on the same day, he declared there would be no reclassification of cannabis.

What prompted the media’s change of tone? *The Express* was not a surprise. Rosie Boycott, who in her days at *The Independent on Sunday* had campaigned for the decriminalisation of cannabis, had become *Express* Editor. *The Guardian* interviewed Charles Moore, editor of *The Daily Telegraph*, on his switch. He explained: “We are making criminals of hundreds of thousands of people even though they are not particularly wicked.” As it happened, Dame Runciman sat on the Press Complaints Commission on which Paul Dacre, editor-in-chief of the *Mail* papers was also a member. He had many opportunities to see how well



informed and intelligent she was. He is known to be influenced by the people he meets. The message went out that the report should be treated seriously. The facts that it set out clearly showed the current policy was not working. A country with some of the toughest drugs laws of any developed state had the highest proportion of drug users. The analysis was accepted, but not the proposals.

That year, the media delivered another unexpected whammy to politicians over tough talk on drugs. At the annual Conservative Party conference, Ann Widdecombe, imagining she was playing to receptive media ears, declared that people caught in possession of cannabis a second time, no matter how small an amount, should be sent to prison. There would be no cautions or "hiding places" for such people. The media quickly discovered the police had not even been asked whether this was workable. And *The Mail on Sunday* followed up with an exclusive survey revealing that seven shadow cabinet ministers had tried cannabis in their youth. *The Guardian* headline summed up the media coverage: "How Tory drug policy went up in smoke."

However, anybody who imagined that these examples heralded a sea-change in media reporting on drugs at the dawn of the new millennium would have been sorely disappointed. Tabloid coverage of drugs is generally dire. As a special issue of *Druglink* on media coverage noted in 2006, even the General Secretary of the National Union of Journalists, Jeremy Dear, was critical: "...all too often the nature of the reporting on drug-related issues is superficial, relies on stereotypes and scare stories." Or, as Roy Greenslade,

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formerly of *The Sun*, *The Mirror* and now chief media commentator for *Guardian Online*, wrote in the same issue of *Druglink*: "what the media tend to achieve, however, is surely the opposite of their proclaimed intention. Rather than turn young people away from drugs, it entices them. Both the act of drug-taking and the fact that it is done illicitly is glamourised. Instead of turning people away from drugs and crime, it reinforces their desire to mimic the famous."

Worse still is the degree to which in general, the media prevent a serious discussion of drugs by its eagerness to demonise the users. As the Royal Society of Arts Commission on Illegal Drugs, Communities and Public Policy, which reported in 2007, noted: "Demons are diabolical, evil spirits and are therefore to be slain. In our view, using such language and thinking in such terms is childish, if not mediaeval. It stifles national and realistic debate and makes it harder, not easier, to deal with the very serious matters at hand."

Ironically, much media coverage runs

counter to public opinion as recorded by the polls. A survey for the Runciman commission found only 0.5% of people thought action against cannabis should be a police priority. As long ago as 1994, a MORI poll found 80 per cent of the public wanting a more relaxed approach to the control of cannabis.

It is my contention that the media is more at fault than the politicians for the failure to modernise our drug laws. True, a succession of politicians from both major parties have reverted to tough hard line rhetoric in the hope of currying favour with the electorate. True, the politicians should have been more ready to stand up to the tabloids and to recognise that the papers do not entirely reflect public opinion. The public are ready to accept more progressive policies. They do not want to see their children being given criminal records. But it is the media that has prevented a serious public debate taking place on our outdated legislation.

Runciman concluded after its exhaustive survey that the 1971 Act passed to categorise drugs by harmfulness no longer reflected modern scientific, medical or sociological evidence. Twelve years ago the media accepted this message, but then forgot about it. The fault lines set out in 2000 are still as relevant in 2012 some 41 years after the passage of the 1971 Act. It is time that *The Mail* and *The Telegraph* remembered their earlier editorials and acted on them.

■ **Malcolm Dean** spent 38 years working for *The Guardian*. His book, *Democracy Under Attack – how the media distort policy and politics* is published by the Policy Press.