

# This is Britain, buddy

**Is Britain just a time-lagged version of the USA? That was the major debating point at London's crack conference.**



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I WAS FEELING tense and irritable at the London Community Against Crack conference last October. Perhaps it had something to do with the addresses given by US speakers Bob Stutman and Dr Marc Gold. A torrent of speech, a video collage of disaster and flashing slides of data had left me giddy. I chatted to a drugs coordinator as Dr Gold approached us. My fellow country-person asked about drug education in the US.

Gold: Well, we have it in grades four through ten, and in all the subjects...

Brit: And in geography do you tell them about the economic and political conditions that lead to coca cultivation?

Gold: This is America, buddy. (Walks off.)

Here lies at least part of the crack problem. Reference was made throughout the morning sessions to 'the American experience'. But there is a lack of self-reflection in this version of the American drug experience.

For example, a few days before I had been in New York, watching TV as news came over of the latest killing in the city. A drug enforcement agent had shot a fleeing suspect, whose car had then crashed. It made good TV news, but who shot who? Just who is upping the stakes in this latest war on drugs? I dare say the shooting will be recorded as drug-related and later swell the data that flash past as evidence of the horrific nature of the problem.

US 'drug tsar' William Bennett — who last year said it would be "morally plausible" to behead drug dealers — now seriously entertains shooting down planes suspected of carrying drug smugglers. Airborne agents should, he said, have the same enforcement rights as a "police officer in the inner city to stop someone from speeding away" (*Drug Enforcement Report*, 25 September 1989).

On my way back to London, I bumped into a friend from the British police. US enforcement people he'd met could not believe he did not routinely carry a gun. Similarly, key American speakers at the London conference could not accept that a response to crack other than the one they represented was any response at all. For Dr Gold, disbelievers were "not on this planet". Nor did the Americans seem very curious about the British experience, implying that either it had to be understood as a time-lagged version of the American experience, or else it did not exist.

Thankfully, Peter Spurgeon from the Home Office drugs inspectorate, Dr Andrew Johns of St George's Hospital in London, and the afternoon panel session provided evidence of

independent thought.

In the panel session, Phyllis Ferguson of ADFAM, Steve Tippell of south London's Community Drug Project, and Colin Cripps from Newham, combined with the majority sentiment on the conference floor to sprinkle chilled water over the City of London's excitable proposals for anti-crack videos, etc. Mr Spurgeon's textbook account of the British approach had laid the ground for the final consensus that, rather than run a series of emergency campaigns against different drugs (crack, ice, etc), we should evolve the British heroin-focused approach to take account of the reality of stimulant use.

SO DID ANYTHING useful come out of the conference? Perhaps. It is becoming clear that more attention needs to be paid to the structures within which policy is formulated, and through which multi-agency cooperation does or does not occur. As a representative from the London Boroughs Association pointed out, these structures

are unclear, to say the least.

My own view remains that the recommendations of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs in their 1982 *Treatment and Rehabilitation* report — regional coordination through drug dependency units, local coordination through drug advisory committees — were poorly framed (see minority view in the Advisory Council's *Prevention* report). Nowadays, they are manifestly a shambles.

This has recently been implicitly recognised by the Department of Health in its drive to appoint substance misuse officers in regional health authorities. How these are supposed to relate to LEA drug education coordinators, to police, or to social services and so on has yet to be answered — as has the question of a national meeting point accepted as 'neutral ground'.

Some drug squad officers are arguing for a national forum, linking this to suggestions that assets confiscated from traffickers could be split between law enforcement, the SCODA agencies, education, and research. Some MPs have signed an Early Day motion supporting this idea. What are the views of drug agencies? Will local authorities stake a broader claim? Will the Home Office develop some national multi-sector coordination mechanism alongside moves towards a national detective agency?

THIS IS BRITAIN, not America. That does not mean we sit snoring in our tweeds. It means our response to crack will be less of a one-off initiative, and more of a broader structural and policy shift. In this sense, things may soon get quite exciting. ■

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*It would be 'morally plausible' to behead drug dealers, said US 'drug tsar' Bennett*

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