

# WHO IS DRIVING TORY DRUG POLICY?



Unless Tory leader David Cameron changes his views, he could be leading a government with a drug policy he does not believe in. **Martin Barnes** hunts for clues on what may happen in the drugs arena under Tory rule.

*"With a few brave exceptions...drugs policy is an area where British politicians have feared to tread."*  
Home Affairs Select Committee, 2002

*"I feel extremely strongly about this subject and desperately want to see a reduction in drug abuse and better paths to enable people to get out of it. If one takes a slightly progressive – or, as I like to think of it, thoughtful – view, one can sometimes be accused of being soft. I reject that utterly."*  
David Cameron MP, 2002

The phrase 'a week is a long time in politics' is a truism. Given the fast moving and increasingly surreal times we live in, 'at the time of writing' is a helpful proviso for any prediction of the outcome of the next general election. Despite a recent boost in approval ratings for the Prime Minister, the Conservative Party maintains a healthy lead in the opinion polls – so what might drug policy look like under a Conservative government with David Cameron as Prime Minister?

Within weeks of becoming an MP in June 2001, Cameron joined the influential Home Affairs Select Committee. A month later, the committee announced an inquiry into the effectiveness of drug policy and the government's ten-year drug strategy.

Published in 2002, the committee's report concluded that drugs policy should primarily deal with problematic heroin and crack users, 'rather than towards the large numbers whose drug use poses no serious threat either to their own well being or to that of others'.

The committee's recommendations included support for reclassification of cannabis from Class B to Class C, and ecstasy from Class A to a Class B drug. On drug treatment the report declared that 'all treatments and therapies should have abstinence as their goal', but also called for a substantial increase in spending, an expansion of methadone so that it became universally available and stated that 'there is still an urgent need for harm reduction actions...both a treatment strategy and harm reduction strategy are necessary...'. The report concluded by recommending that the government discuss with the UN's Commission on Narcotic Drugs alternative ways of tackling drugs globally 'including the possibility of legalisation and regulation'.

Cameron did not vote against any of the recommendations in the report – indeed, he voted against several amendments proposed by another Conservative MP member. In a debate on drugs policy in December 2002, he spoke specifically in support of heroin prescribing and the use of safe injecting rooms. His comments on drug treatment are pertinent in light of the polarisation of the debate between harm reduction and

abstinence: "I understand that there is no single method of treatment that always works. We need to have a variety of methods....Although residential places are not the only answer...I support the proposal to increase the number, while retaining all the existing treatment options."

In October 2004 the then shadow home secretary, David Davis MP, announced that a Conservative government would make the fight against drugs a 'top priority'. Accusing the Labour Government of presiding over an 'epidemic' of drug use and of 'standing aside' from the problem, he said: "Some people say we have lost the war on drugs, I say we have not begun to fight it." The Conservatives pledged to "accelerate" random drug testing in schools, increase drug rehabilitation places ten-fold (from 2,000 to 20,000) and reclassify cannabis from Class C to Class B. The speech alarmed advisers in Downing Street.

## JUST AS 'ONLY NIXON COULD GO TO CHINA', A RIGHT-OF-CENTRE GOVERNMENT MAY ADOPT A PROGRESSIVE APPROACH TO DRUGS POLICY

It was probably no co-incidence that a few weeks later – with an eye to the general election expected the following year – Tony Blair announced new measures to 'crack down' on those who "peddle the misery of drugs". What became the Drugs Act 2005 was born. To many, the 'tougher than thou' stances on drugs underlined the crude politics of the issue.

Has Cameron kept faith with his progressive and thoughtful approach since becoming party leader in December 2005? One of his first acts as leader was to commission a number of policy reviews. A Social Justice Policy Group was established, chaired by Iain Duncan Smith MP. It established a separate 'addictions working group', chaired by Kathy Gyngell, to look specifically at drug and alcohol policy.

In light of Cameron's publicly stated support for a more 'progressive' approach to drugs policy there was the possibility that the policy review would nudge the party closer to the views of the party leader. Cameron's response to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation report on drug consumption rooms, published in May 2006, echoed his previous stance. While the Government barely blinked before saying no to consumption room pilots, Cameron did not rule them out: "...because anything that helps get users off the streets and in touch with agencies that can provide treatment is worth looking at." The issue was to be looked at as part of the party's policy review.

The addictions working group report was published in July 2007 – and delivered a damning verdict on the government's drug policy: "Under ten years of Labour's drug strategy, policy itself has become an intrinsic part of the problem. It has been a costly investment in failure." Both barrels were fired: "Spending is often wasteful, unwise and misdirected...Bureaucracy has grown dramatically and has further entrenched addiction. [Treatment is a] misguided system of social control [with] counterproductive targets...Enforcement appears weak, drug education in schools...could be doing more harm than good." And so on. Although the report accepted that methadone has a "useful and positive role in the treatment of addiction," methadone prescribing was at the same time branded as a "harm

reduction" measure and harm reduction approaches were attacked.

The report has not been formally adopted as party policy, but by filling a vacuum its headline theme of 'abstinence-versus-harm reduction' has continued to gain traction. It has set the mood music for the Conservative Party's responses to reports over the last 12 months by the BBC's Home Affairs editor Mark Easton on the relatively small proportion of people leaving treatment 'drug-free'. Shadow home secretary Dominic Grieve, said: "The government's entire approach of simply trying to manage addiction is wrong...despite a significant increase in investment there has been a paltry increase in the number of addicts going clean. This failing approach is compounded by Labour's mixed and confused messages on the dangers posed by cannabis and ecstasy."

The latest official Conservative Party statement on drugs policy can be found in *Repair – Plan for social reform*, published in October. It accuses Labour of an approach of "maintenance and management, which has failed" and promises to introduce an abstinence-based Drug Rehabilitation Order and "residential-abstinence orientated programmes" including day-care programmes. There is no further detail.

As to what the commitment to increase abstinence based treatment may cost, the Scottish Conservative Party pledged in its manifesto for the 2007 Scottish Parliament Election that it would spend an additional £100 million a year on drug rehabilitation (saving, it claimed, £1 billion a year on policing, prisons and healthcare services). If the commitment were replicated in England – assuming an additional spend rather than a re-allocation within existing budgets and matched on a population basis – the drug treatment budget would have to increase by up to £1 billion a year. That is, of course, extremely unlikely.

To date, the only recommendation in the Select Committee report Cameron has stepped away from is on the classification of cannabis, justified on the grounds that the drug "is so much more powerful than it used to be". The government's decision to go against the advice of the ACMD and reclassify cannabis back to B has neutralised attacks on the issue.

When Cameron talks about "compassionate Conservatism" and the need to fix "broken Britain", he usually refers to the problems caused by drug and alcohol misuse – but stops short of specific pronouncements on drug policy. In a recently published book, *Cameron on Cameron*, when challenged on cannabis classification he said: "...I think the whole classification system is in need of a major overhaul because it seems to me that the ABC method does not really get it right...These evaluations are all based on the 1971 Misuse of Drugs Act, and a lot has changed since then." An interesting return perhaps to the backbencher who supported "thoughtful" drug policy reform.

There are both punitive and progressive strands within Conservative drug policy, to some extent embodied, respectively, by successive Conservative shadow home secretaries on the one hand, and the party leader, David Cameron, on the other. Just as 'only Nixon could go to China', a right-of-centre government may adopt a progressive approach to drugs policy, but to date there are few signs of Conservative drug policy moving closer to the views of its leader. It will be interesting to see how this contradiction plays out over the coming months. Unless Cameron changes his views, he could be leading a government with a drug policy he does not believe in.

■ **Martin Barnes** is chief executive of DrugScope