

Drug-taking is on the increase. What can be done about it?

Britain's DRUG Problem

Bent Gordon

'We will treat the victims, and we will warn the vulnerable, but must tackle the evil itself. It is the Government's urgent priority to cut off the flow of drugs and hit supply.'

With these words Health Minister Mr Kenneth Clarke addressed the Conservative Party Conference, summing up the Government's strategy to reduce drug abuse — or, at least, to reduce mounting concern over drug abuse.

The new measures include an extra £5m for drug treatment and rehabilitation services, a campaign of public information, more customs officers, organised in mobile squads and life sentences for heroin traffickers and dealers. These measures are perhaps the least that a Conservative administration, alert to pressures from the grassroots, could be expected to mount. Not since the 60s has a political party conference debated drugs. Both the Conservatives and Labour parties recognise that whilst there is a degree of overstatement and misinformation about drugs doing the rounds, there has been some increase in levels of drug use - especially heroin use (today often smoked rather than injected). Each party paints the problem in ways familiar to it, Labour emphasising unemployment and the cuts for the increase in drug use and for inadequate facilities for a response, whilst the Tories pose the issue as a moral one.

The issue of drug abuse is addressed in a climate of concern for law and order. And the stage has perhaps been reached where the Government's credibility is at least partly bound up with the question of its ability to *translate* its success in redefining crime as a central political issue, into an

equal success in reducing crime - or at least reducing the appearance of crime.

This is the context within which policy about drug misuse now mainly falls. Earlier this year, for example, the 'policy lead' on drugs passed from a DHSS-led informal network of civil servants in the DHSS, Home Office, DES and Scottish Home and Health Department, to a more formal, standing ministerial group chaired by Home Office minister David Mellor. It is also the Government's intention, announced earlier this year, to bring in legislation during the present Parliament for life sentences plus confiscation of assets for drug traffickers. Whether this will have the hoped-for effect remains to be seen. Labour MP Clive Soley has suggested that such penalties will not be effective, and

what is needed is a firm response

mean that criminals will be more ready to use arms in order to evade capture. But as a party, Labour has a history of joining with Conservatives in seeking a solution to the drug problem through the imposition of higher and higher penalties for suppliers. There is no fundamental break between the drug policies of the two parties as far as their attitudes to suppliers are concerned.

The new anti-trafficker plans may serve to take the heat off the Government in respect of a rising panic over crime at the other end of the market - the young user who reportedly indulges in occasional property crime. There has been sustained press reporting of an alleged link between heroin use and crime, especially in the local press, and it seems now to be almost a

conventional lay wisdom that heroin use leads to crime.

It is not difficult to see how this perception might arise and make sense to millions warned about youth, crime and the coming apart of familiar patterns of economy and culture in Britain - particularly in areas of high unemployment. People see many bad things happening, and they put them together in ways that make sense to a British sensibility. There is an enemy without - dirty foreigners who are sending us their filthy drugs and making victims of our children. Yes, our children do sometimes steal from mother's purse, in the street or from cars and property - but this is because they have been led astray not only by outsiders but also by an enemy within (permissive, pot-smoking social workers and the like), and hence been trapped into expensive vices. Yes, we cannot communicate with or control our children — but that's not our fault, we always did our best. Yes, there is more crime nowadays, but the causes are not intrinsic to the society to which we have given our consent — the causes lie in our softening as people.

What is needed is a firm response. As pop star Pete Townshend put it to a meeting at the Conservative Party Conference: 'There can be no shilly-shallying. Children have to be shoved, pushed and bullied'. It's common sense!

There are signs that this populist perception of the problem has now run considerably ahead of the Government's intentions. Whilst a stress on nationality and domestic law and order has been a cornerstone of the Government's general appeal on policy issues, and whilst the drawing of parental responsibility into the centre of debate is welcomed, there is some feeling that the present wave of anxiety might go too far. One concern is around proposals put forward by Conservative MP Teddy Taylor amongst others that a large-scale anti-drug advertising campaign be mounted (*Sunday Express*, April 29).

This raises two questions. First, would any such campaign work, in the sense of causing a diminution of drug use and associated problems? Second, whether or not drug use actually declined, might not the decline be immeasurable or minimal, and might not the campaign have the grossly counter-productive effect of whipping up yet more public anxiety over drug use? Might not drug use become such a *bete noire* that more and more social ills become attributed to it — and the Government criticised for not eradicating this menace?

Might not the Government, in other words, be hoist on its own petard, and find that an anti-drug publicity campaign acted as a rogue spotlight illuminating what, in the context of a commitment to crime prevention, looks like an embarrassing failure?

If, on the other hand, the Government 'does nothing' then it may be accused of inaction. The Irish Government has been considerably embarrassed by the quite favourable publicity gained by Sinn Fein in warning, moving on and punishing criminals, including drug dealers. Several conversations amongst concerned groups and persons in the UK have turned this way, with parents saying that it is a pity there are no vigilantes in their localities. Local politicians have supported local drug advice and/or rehabilitation centres and have pressed central government to do more. At national level, Labour's Michael Meacher has used colourful descriptions of the drug problem as a stick to beat the Government over its general social and health policies. There are evidently dangers for the Government in doing too little, as well as in doing too much. Drug abuse may not be an absolutely central political issue, but it is too sensitive to get badly

wrong.

So, what advice have ministers been getting from their civil servants?

The Home Office, increasingly the key ministry, is drawing not only upon its experience built up over the years of constructing statistics on drug-related crime and on notified addicts, but also upon its more general research and policy planning in the area of crime prevention. One major Home Office research effort of the last few years has been to look at the possibilities for reducing people's belief in the probability of their or their neighbours becoming the victims of crimes committed by drug users, rather than stoke their existing fears. In line with this, the Government is currently more concerned to reassure its public that effective steps are being taken to get the big pushers than to invite the community to participate in a 'war on drugs' of the kind that President Nixon declared in the 70s. The current relatively low-key approach reflects an appreciation of the dangers of overstimulating expectations that this particular aspect of public policy can provide exemplary successes.

At the DHSS there has been a scramble to respond to the recent politicisation of

drug problems. The combination of a general emphasis upon self-help and a specific focus upon *parental* responsibility have resulted in an appeal to parents to understand and control their offspring. The state, as Health Minister Kenneth Clarke stressed, cannot and should not be expected to substitute for parents. It has fallen to the DHSS, as the ministry closest to 'the family', to draw up a leaflet for parents.

Overall, the Government's strategy against drug abuse consists of three main parts. For the young victims — compassion, care and a search for a cure. For parents and professionals whose responsibility it is to take care and control of the young, the vulnerable and the anti-social elements in society — advice, support, and limited resources to enable them to discharge those responsibilities. But for the morally debased entrepreneurs who take free market theory a little bit too literally, and profit from the importation, distribution and trade in illegal drugs — denunciation. The strategy has a bit in it for everyone, and is a reasonable stop-gap for a Government that knows that there really is very little that it can do to stop heroin use in present social conditions. •

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