



Is drug policy moving backwards?

Speakers at last week's Release conference agreed that drug policy isn't working, and warned that our failure to look beyond crime and punishment would continue to stall progress. **DDN** reports.

The past 40 years have proved that the hard authoritarian punishment model of demonising drug dealers and users is a failure. Prohibition causes harms far greater than those it is intended to address. It is an expensive malevolent social policy that, far from protecting society from any harms drugs can do, is a barrier impeding our ability to help vulnerable people, especially those under the age of 18.

These were the words of Caroline Coon, founder of drug users' support charity Release, who spoke at their 40th anniversary conference last week. Now 62, she looked back to 1967 and remembered her 'youthful outrage at the way powerful adults treat young people'. She recalled the Release casebook of those early days, when suspicious looking young people were stopped and searched and 'disappeared into the prison system'. She evoked an era when the authorities suddenly turned on hippie culture and dragged many young people through the courts for possessing the smallest amounts of cannabis. Fast forwarding to earlier this year, Coon said she had to pinch herself while watching the Home Secretary on TV in May, announcing new stop and search powers. She felt that there had been an astonishing refusal to learn from unworkable drugs policy, which continued to drive a wedge between politicians and democracy.

Back in the '60s many people came to Release because 'the only problem they had with drugs was that they were being criminalised and threatened with prison'. Others who were experiencing problems with their drug use needed help, not punishment; their behaviour was 'a sure indicator of distress' and a sign that they needed social support intervention from careful adults outside the family, said Coon.

'Whatever the law, humans will use pleasure-giving drugs. Whatever the law, we will always need to care for those who use drugs self-destructively to mask emotional distress... We should not vote for politicians who insist on dragging vulnerable "problematic" people through the courts,' she said.

Opening Release's conference, Simon Hughes MP warned that we were continuing to build up the number of suspects in our society, 'people it's likely

police will go after first, who include many drug users – a higher number here than in any other country in Europe.

‘Once branded a drug user, it can become a difficulty for life,’ he said.

Hughes was worried about the ‘creeping pace’ of legislation that made drug users likely targets. Anti-social behaviour orders were building a reservoir of people who could find themselves in the criminal justice system, if they triggered a breach. Police had a right to enter members of the public on the DNA database ‘even if you are stopped and have done nothing’, and four million people had been entered already. Biometric tests and fingerprinting were coming soon he said, and ID cards would be introduced in two years’ time.

Law changes worried Hughes on several levels. He felt legislation was becoming ‘less comprehensible’ to normal people, while money on legal aid and advice had increased in ‘minuscule proportion’ to the amount spent on other public services. ‘So liberties are being reduced while the chances of getting appropriate help are diminished.’ Around 80,000 people were incarcerated in UK prisons, he pointed out – more than ever, and more than in other European countries. Many of these prisoners had a history of drug use.

‘I am absolutely clear that people with a history of drug or alcohol use are not best served in prison,’ he said.

Lord David Ramsbotham, former chief inspector of prisons, agreed with this sentiment. His experience had led him to the conclusion that ‘our prisons are not fit for purpose’. Furthermore, the National Offender Management Service (NOMS), created in 2005 to modernise the approach, had become ‘the nightmare on Marsham Street, a monster bureaucracy’. ‘No-one knows what it’s doing and it deflects people from what they could be doing,’ he commented.

Mandatory drug testing was a farce, as it used figures taken from just 5 per cent of prisoners to represent drug-taking in prisons, he said. The CARAT scheme was also farcical he believed, as nothing happened to support people once they were released from prison.

The prison system had lost sight of helping people to make the transition back to law-abiding lives, said Ramsbotham, who highlighted the need to look at what was stopping them from rejoining society – lack of education, blood-borne viruses, substance misuse. Transformation of empty, listless days, to a full and active routine could give people a different experience of prison, he believed: ‘This lack of activity is behind suicides, drug-taking and assaults.’

He also believed imprisoning people close to their home area would give them a much better chance of reintegrating to their family and community, and give local organisations an opportunity to support them through their rehabilitation.

When British Leyland had a skills shortage they went to Preston Prison and trained up prisoners for jobs, giving them a route to employment and a chance to re-establish themselves in the community.

‘We should use the opportunity of a prison sentence to identify, challenge and treat problems

people might have,’ he said. ‘The amount of money that’s been wasted in the prison system makes me weep,’ he added. ‘As it’s currently structured, prison is no place for treatment.’

Joe Boyd, American record producer and author, was in and around Release in the early days, and saw at first hand Caroline Coon’s ‘will and determination’ in representing ‘ordinary kids [who] were seen to be indulging in deviant behaviour’.

‘June 1967 was the beginning of the war on drugs,’ he recalled. ‘Psychedelic culture and flamboyance gave society the trigger for a more aggressive stance. Did it work? Of course not.’

Busted twice for drugs, once in the US and once here, Boyd experienced a white middle class version of drug law: in each case he got off because he had been to Harvard, spoke nicely, dressed up for his trial. ‘It was not in the interests of the system that I should be thrown onto the other side,’ he said.

He realised that others from a less fortunate background were having an entirely different experience.

‘The vast war on drugs in this country has been excuse to have a war on the underclass... it is used to attack people on the other side of the divide,’ he said. ‘In the name of the war on drugs, terrible crimes have been committed.’ Allen St Pierre added his comments from his perspective as executive director of the US-based lobbying organisation, NORML, which campaigns to legalise cannabis. Of 2.3m people in jail in the US, between 60,000 and 80,000 had been imprisoned for cannabis alone – ‘someone is arrested for cannabis every 40 seconds’.

He warned against the ‘new reefer madness being practised here in the UK’ and said it was important risks were not exaggerated, particularly by the media.

‘Hold your media and don’t allow them to be baseless in fact,’ he said. ‘Reefer madness is highly contagious.’

Simon Jenkins, a *Guardian* and *Sunday Times* columnist, had covered the London drugs scene as a young reporter and long since formed the view that ‘the only way we can tackle problems of drugs is by legalising the bloody things’.

He had harsh criticism of existing drug policy, particularly the West’s attempts to control cannabis; cocaine (by ‘wiping Columbia off the map’); and opium (‘sending Clare Short out to suppress the Afghan opium crop had the startling result of increasing production by 1000 per cent – surely the most successful economic policy ever!’).

‘The Afghan economy is the opium crop. Why are we spraying, oppressing, killing people who produce it? It’s a more stupid policy than the middle ages could have produced,’ he commented. ‘The entire developed world pretends this is not a problem... [but] it needs the G8 countries to acknowledge that it’s us doing the wrecking.’

There were many examples from other European countries that could help us break our record as the worst in Europe for drug addiction, he added.

Jenkins believed the 1971 Misuse of Drugs Act ‘was a poisonous act in every sense’ and said politicians were terrified to repeal it. Furthermore, politicians covered behind the press, he commented, adding that ‘the press doesn’t rule this country’.

‘We thought the media and politicians would be smarter now, because they’re of our generation – but they’re not!’

‘Get together politicians and senior editors and ask them what their big problem is with the facts,’ he suggested. ‘This stuff has to be brought under control... I believe we have a public ready to press the press.’

We were talking about these issues 40 years ago, reflected Ethan Nadelmann, executive director of the Drug Policy Alliance, a US-based national organisation that campaigns to ‘end the war on drugs’.

‘We thought the media and politicians would be smarter now, because they’re of our generation – but they’re not!’ he said. Instead there was a ‘slow creep’ towards more drug testing and a ‘maximum surveillance society’, with a camera on every corner. Society had become reliant on a media that dragged out the worst examples of people who have used drugs. ‘Reporters are going to go to treatment centres and prisons, where people have screwed up. Imagine doing the same with alcohol,’ he commented.

Living in a ‘highly stimulating and demanding society’, gave rise to many contradictions. Who was to judge that amphetamines were only harmful, he asked, using the example of improved performance in US military who had been given speed to improve concentration and stamina. Many of us relied on coffee each day; some other cultures chewed coca leaf as a normal part of routine – a ‘slow drip’ way of taking cocaine.

‘Who’s going to say who’s going to use what?’ he asked, commenting that doctors were ‘often caught up in the latest fads and fashions’ on drug sales.

Qualifying his opinions by acknowledging that ‘we should never take abstinence out of the equation, as for some people this works best’, Nadelmann questioned the basis for drug prohibition: the assumption that ‘drug-free’ is our natural state.

‘There’s a puritanical religious belief in a drug-free society, and a notion of polluting this God-given vessel, particularly in the US,’ he said.

‘There’s a perception that we’re all born chemical free – but we’re all wired differently.’ **DDN**

Release relies on donations to continue providing free advice on drugs, the law and human rights to those who need it, including the legal helpline. Visit www.release.org.uk