

BLOCKHEADS BLOCKING DRUG LAW REFORM

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This week in Britain, a landmark report two and a half years in the making recommended that the UK government change its attitude to drugs. It said there was a strong case for reclassifying drugs most commonly used for 'recreational' purposes – cannabis, LSD and Ecstasy – so that possession would be a lesser offence than, say heroin or cocaine, and jail would not be an option. The Police Foundation, chaired by Baroness Runciman, which produced the report, is a very respectable body. Its report was substantial, well researched and thoroughly argued.

The government accordingly, immediately rejected it.

This was a classic piece of wooden-headedness, a term coined by the historian, Barbara Tuchman, to describe the willful pursuit of a course of action by, primarily, political figures who know that this will not only not achieve their stated aim, but will certainly lead to a catastrophe. One 'wooden-headed' example was Hitler's decision to invade Russia and not to withdraw and evacuate his armies when winter fell. Another was that of the town council on a volcanic island which advised residents not to concern themselves about the local volcano's thundering, though the scientific advice was that the mountain was about to blow catastrophically: Why? Because municipal elections were to be held and evacuation would have been unpopular. Days later all councilors and inhabitants, save one, were killed in a pyroclastic cloud.

Why did the Home Secretary reject the Police Foundation recommendations? Not, apparently, because of any quarrel with the research or its findings. Nor, apparently, due to police opposition. Some senior police did oppose any change (those high-profile busts of large quantities of marijuana leaves are easy headlines) but others were more pragmatic. One senior officer said that

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even now, the pursuit of those in possession of cannabis was 'not a priority' in practical policing (he must have been close to retirement). The government's so-called drugs 'tsar' (the UK government's strange term for its high-profile, non-civil servant expert advisers), a former senior police officer was, before his appointment, rather keen on drug law reform, but adapted his position once he came to work more closely with government policy-makers.

Jack Straw, British Home Secretary, claimed that any liberalisation of any drug laws would encourage greater misuse of drugs. It is important to say that there is no research finding, anywhere, substantiating this view. Cannabis consumption is lower in the 'liberal' regimes of the Netherlands, France, Spain and Switzerland, and control of 'hard' drugs more successful.

The fact is that the US-style 'war on drugs' has been based on a simple, moralistic position: drugs are addictive because they are incredibly pleasurable; therefore one must absolutely prohibit such drugs. The fact that this only enhances the attraction of the forbidden, and that no 'prohibition' can prevent the production of a drug that can be grown in your backyard or produced by low-tech means at a negligible cost (Ecstasy); and that drug prohibitions that do not discriminate among the drugs are as closely linked to the growth of organised crime as was the Prohibition of liquor in the US to the development of the Mafia, is (apparently) irrelevant. Thou shalt not get high.

Nor were the recommendations rejected in response to public opinion. Even the tabloid Daily Mail, populist and likely to hold – as it editorialised on 29 March- 'instinctive reservations over a more relaxed approach to soft drugs,' called for an 'hysteria-free and rational examination' of both sides of the argument. This was not to be. Every newspaper either recommended a rational debate (Daily Mail), or favoured change because public opinion was ready for it (The Times, Police Review) or because of the impossible police burden of enforcing ineffective laws (the Express and the Independent).

Positions were taken, in other words, because of a doctrine, which could not be shaken by even clear evidence that the holy war on drugs kills thousands by friendly fire. The Report was rejected, as drug reform generally is, because of doctrinal posturing: the suspension of reason in favour of faith. Thousands die each year from drug abuse or mishap because we choose not to learn from history, or draw the obvious conclusions from the smoking mountain and earth tremors. As rock singer Ian Dury, who died in that same week, proclaimed ironically with his band, The Blockheads: 'Sex and drugs and rock and roll, are all my brain and body need . . .'