

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Current drug policy prohibits the use of a wide variety of substances with the stated aim of eliminating their consumption. It is, however, demonstrably incapable of achieving that over-ambitious goal, indeed drug use throughout the world is widespread and increasing.

The anti-drug attitude that created prohibition is also inhibiting governments and international organisations from admitting this failure, or exploring other approaches. There has been little or no attempt to evaluate the current policy or to compare it with the likely effect of any alternative. Yet what evidence there is suggests that the side-effects of prohibition are more harmful than the drugs themselves. In simple economic terms, for example, the US government spends approximately \$35-40 billion every year on the control of drugs, with little to show for it except staggeringly high (and costly) drug-related incarceration rates.

While it is difficult to dispute that the current policies are not achieving their goals, better control strategies have yet to be agreed on. Policies lacking rigorous evaluation methodologies persist and a lack of research in the area allows politicians to evade facing the fact that a change of approach is required in this difficult political arena. In such a climate, it becomes essential to provide a forum for those with expertise in the drug field to discuss ways of making progress, free from prejudice and political taboo.

The chairs for the day set the scene for the ensuing discussions. *Jan Wiarda*, Chairman of the European Chiefs of Police, stressed the importance of having a more reasonable and less emotionally and politically oriented debate. He greeted the seminar as an occasion for experts in the field to review the effectiveness of current policies at international level, and to consider how to move forward, especially focusing on science and evaluation, so as to reach the most rational conclusions possible. The chair of the afternoon session, *Michael Portillo*, used his insight into the British political system to suggest that, although the nature of politicians and policy has not changed very much over recent years, there has been quite a sea-change in the climate of discussion. People who question whether present policies are effective or correct have moved from being a fringe group to being, as seen at this seminar, a very large number of distinguished people whose qualifications to speak on the subject are universally recognised. He concluded that it was unlikely for such a change to occur in the field of ideas, without it eventually being reflected in a change of policy.

*Peter Reuter* first raised the point, which went on to become a theme of the day, that drugs are a moralistically defined problem in the Western world, a view that imposes constraints both on the policies allowed and the research that is done. If the underlying premise is that drugs are bad and should not be allowed, the agenda has already been set and research is redundant. Talking from an American perspective, he explained that science really plays no role in the formulation of a national drugs strategy, because a policy reliant on punishment is essentially exempt from research. There exists no evidence that tougher enforcement raises prices, reduces availability or prevalence, yet over two-thirds of all government drug budgets are spent on it. He further pointed out that, over a 20-year period, numbers imprisoned for violating drug offences in the US have increased 1000%, while the price of heroin and cocaine

has decreased by 90% in real terms, strongly suggesting that prohibitionist policies are failing. In contrast, there is a substantial body of work to suggest that treatment can and mostly does work, yet this remains a severely under-funded area, with most drug misusers only being offered treatment when they come into contact with the criminal justice system. Even then, access to treatment services is by no means guaranteed.

In today's climate, it is becoming increasingly necessary for those who defend an ever-escalating emphasis on policing and prohibition to clarify publicly what their reasons are for believing that this approach is ever likely to work. No single classification system can ever be perfect but, as *Colin Blakemore* pointed out, it is important to devise the most rational that we can. Because the literal eradication of drug use is not a practical goal of public policy, we should instead concentrate on ways of reducing the overall harmful impact of drugs on individuals and society. Although we must be wary of generalising, the Netherlands experiment seems to suggest that people can be trusted with more relaxed attitudes to less harmful substances. A scale of harm of all social drugs, in which the harmfulness of each drug is continuously reviewed in the light of scientific, sociological and economic evidence, is proposed as a more rational and evidence-based approach than the current classifications. It is recognised that harm is multi-dimensional, so a number of criteria are considered, and legal drugs like alcohol and tobacco need to be included for calibration purposes. Interestingly, these legal substances are at, or near, the top of every category of harm, comparing with, or exceeding, hard drugs such as heroin and crack cocaine on scales such as toxicity, mortality and dependency; costs to the NHS; relation to crime; and total economic impact.

*Mark Kleiman* agreed that the existing global drug policy, a one-size-fits-all policy aimed at a mythical drug-free society where caffeine, alcohol and tobacco are not counted as drugs, is fundamentally flawed. He argued that once a mature drug market is established, increasing law enforcement has little additive effect in deterring drug use. He drew attention to the fact that classifying a substance as a Schedule 1/Class A drug has the unproductive effect of blocking research into that substance. He also highlighted a disadvantage of an evidence-based, harm-minimising drug policy where controls placed on each drug are proportioned to the harmfulness of that drug, commenting that such a scale did not take into consideration the potential benefits of currently illegal substances. Many of these drugs are approved for medical use, but medical utility is not the only utility a psychoactive drug might have. Other potential benefits, such as facilitating collective worship, individual spiritual exploration, and the acquisition of self-knowledge are supported by a large evidence base which, although consisting mainly of self-reports, should not be dismissed. He pointed out that, just as it is impossible to form an optimal alcohol policy without acknowledging the fact that millions of people get harmless pleasure from its use, so the relatively low-risk benefits of other drugs should also be considered.

Two regional examples of some of the successes and failures of current national drug policies were presented, by *Margaret Hamilton* who considered the harm minimisation approach adopted by the Australian government, and by *Chairman Cherkesov*, who discussed the problems Russia encounters in trying to tackle international drug smuggling. The Beckley Foundation was honoured to have the head of the Federal Drug Control Service in Russia attend the seminar, and his talk highlighted the international threat posed by the role of drugs in organised crime

and the need for a united effort in order to deal with this threat. The trade in drugs empowers organised criminals, corrupts governments, erodes internal security, elicits violence and distorts economic markets and moral values, while creating the underbelly of an addicted population that is highly costly to society, both in terms of health and crime. He recognised that prohibition was not the only answer to the drugs trade and the problem of addiction, and that a vigorous prevention effort in conjunction with effective treatment and rehabilitation of addicts was also necessary.

*Margaret Hamilton* described the Australian drug market, and outlined the benefits of adopting a harm-minimisation approach informed by research. Due to their ability to change the way we think, feel and behave, drugs have attained symbolic status and meaning in our society. As a result of this powerful capacity, they may also have become easy targets and the scapegoat for the existence of unstable communities and disillusioned youth. The very illegal status of drugs may accrue some benefit for politicians whose hard-nosed reputations may be enhanced by a rhetorical fight in a 'war' against drugs. She highlighted the need for researchers to have done their homework for times when drugs become high profile in public and political arenas. At these times, researchers have to offer advice and predictions based on their previous experience and any available 'evidence'. Although the task proves difficult, they must most importantly try to remain independent. Drug policy is by its very nature irrational, but it is crucial for researchers and practitioners to become involved in the policy process, and to develop tools to help predict outcomes and evaluate policies, while being realistic about their limitations.

Having considered national interpretations of international policies and the effects of current policies on trends in drug use and supply, it was then interesting to hear how current legislation impacts on those meant to enforce it. *Jan Wiarda* spoke from a cop's point of view, highlighting the dilemma faced by police forces asked to fight a war that cannot be won. The ambiguity that this paradox creates for police officers in the field leads to personal dilemmas, and can cause corruption and lost integrity. Illegal drugs exacerbate the tension between the two roles of the police, to serve and protect the public versus to act as a power system of the state. The coping mechanisms used to combat these tensions are either to deny the problem (the attitude of management police), or to "do things your own way" (the attitude of the police on the street). The truth is suspended, hoping for better times, and open debate is blocked, because a code of silence is adopted at all levels. These problems will continue until international policy removes the elimination of drug use as its stated target.

*Mike Trace*, who introduced the morning debate, provided an overview of the role of the Beckley Foundation in formulating possible solutions, or at least improvements, to some of the current drug-related problems. He highlighted the difficulties faced when doing research with psychoactive substances, with particular concern for the invisible barriers blocking objective scientific research. Over a forty year period, one would expect there to be clear signposts as to the efficacy of the policies in place but the evidence base remains extremely sparse. Although it is unclear how successful policies have been, he asserted that evaluation should not be abandoned.

The afternoon session focused on how one could learn from previous experiences and build on the current evidence base to develop the new EU Drug Strategy (2005-2012). The process of the 'making of' the new strategy has once again shown that rational debate is difficult to achieve at an international level in the drug policy

arena. *Franz Trautmann* explained the difficulty of getting consensus on the various issues covered by the strategy at EU level, and the ultimate weakening of the strategy's content by necessary compromise. *Josef Radimecky* talked of the ambitious rather than realistic nature of the Strategy, and its inability to withstand critical reading. He described the need for such a document to stick to defined key principles, and the important role of experts in preparing a politically and scientifically correct document to present to politicians. Although both the current and future strategy came up against a barrage of criticism, both speakers were optimistic that at least some progress had been made.

*Mike Trace*, in summing up the afternoon session, highlighted the importance of evaluation as a means of providing evidence as to whether a particular policy was successful or not. The current EU Drug Strategy, drafted five years ago, although not without its faults, did attempt to set outcome objectives and an agenda of how those objectives could be measured. It is of particular concern that the commitment to evaluating progress in relation to objectives is much looser in the current draft of the future strategy than it was in the last. In effect, governments and international organisations are set to embark on an 8-year drug strategy without setting anything in place to measure whether it is achieving a reduction in drug-related problems or a reduction in drug-related harms.

The simple reason, ignored by most governments, for the widespread use of illegal drugs is that many people enjoy intoxication, experiencing a state that is in some way different to normal. Many consider moderate drug use to be fun and sociable, while others claim that it may also be therapeutic or mind-expanding. Humans have been using psychoactive substances since prehistoric times and most people today have experienced some form of chemically-induced altered state of mind. The majority are able to consume drugs in moderation without losing control and descending into the greatly feared abyss of abuse and addiction. *Mark Kleiman* raised the interesting comparison with alcohol, which like its illegal counterparts, is used sensibly by the vast majority, but misused by a small percentage of the population. The laws restricting alcohol are mediated by the government's recognition that millions get minimal-risk enjoyment from its consumption. It may be time for policymakers to acknowledge the existence of a human instinct towards occasional intoxication, by whatever means, and take the relatively 'safe' and enjoyable consumption of certain drugs by large numbers of people into account in future policy formation.

Forty years of international focus on criminalisation and punishment has had little success. The hard-line approach to drugs adopted to date has not been effective, and in those countries where drug policy is the most strongly prohibitionist, the problem is often the worst. This suggests it is time to look at alternative ways of dealing with these substances, based on knowledge of what they actually do to the body and the brain, and why people choose to take them. Drug taking is not restricted to any social category or class, and it is rapidly becoming a universal phenomenon, which cannot be ignored. The ultimate aim is to achieve a rational overview of the scientific, medical, social and economic issues surrounding the use and abuse of drugs, both legal and illegal. Most people would agree that more informed debate is needed as the basis of any further change in attitude and policy, and this seminar provided an arena in which to advance these discussions.

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