



PRESS RELEASE

THE PHONEY WAR ON DRUGS

The failure of government drug policy exposed

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The Government has repeatedly declared that it is fighting a War on Drugs. But this has been a Phoney War, shows Kathy Gyngell in *The Phoney War on Drugs* published on Monday 18 May 2009 by the Centre for Policy Studies. **For the UK now has one of the most liberal drug policies in Europe.** Both Sweden and the Netherlands (despite popular misconceptions) have a more rigorous approach – and far fewer problems with drugs.

Kathy Gyngell shows how the Labour Government has taken a **new direction for drug policy**. Its new “harm-reduction” strategy aimed to reduce the cost of problem drug use. The focus was switched from combating all illicit drug use to the problems of PDUs. Cannabis was declassified. Spending on methadone treatment increased threefold between 2003 and 2008. The aim of treatment for drug offenders was no longer abstinence but management of their addiction with the aim of reducing their reoffending. In practice, this meant prescribing methadone.

But this harm-reduction approach has failed. **It has entrapped 147,000 people in state-sponsored (mainly methadone) addiction.** Addicts leaving government treatment programmes clean of drug use are at the same level as if there had been no treatment programme at all.

The UK now faces a widening and a deepening crisis. Over the last 10 years, Class A consumption and 'problem drug use' have risen dramatically, drug use has spread to rural areas and the age of children's initiation into drugs has dropped. 41% of 15 year olds, and 11% of 11 year olds, have taken drugs. Drug death rates continue to rise and are far higher than the European average. The UK has 47.5 deaths per million population (aged 15 to 64) compared to 22.0 in Sweden and 9.6 in the Netherlands. There are over ten Problem Drug Users (PDUs) per 1,000 of the adult population, compared to 4.5 in Sweden or 3.2 in the Netherlands.

Weak enforcement and prevention

The UK drugs market is estimated to be worth £5 billion a year. In comparison, the Government is spending only £380 million a year – or 28% of the total drugs budget – attempting to control the supply of drugs (over £800 million is spent on treatment programmes and reducing drug-related crime). Only five boats now patrol the UK's 7,750 mile coastline.

The numbers of recorded offences for importing, supply and possession of illicit drugs have all fallen over the last 10 years. At the same time, seizures of drugs have fallen and drug prices have dropped to record low. The quantity of heroin, cocaine and cannabis that has been seized coming into the UK has fallen by 68%, 16% and 34% respectively.

An alternative

Both Sweden and the Netherlands have far more coherent and effective drugs policies. All illicit drug use is targeted. Treatment is clearly aimed at breaking addiction. Drug laws are clearly understood and enforced. And, unlike in the UK, the majority of the drugs budget of both countries is spent on prevention and enforcement.

As Kathy Gyngell demonstrates, these principles have been lost sight of over the last 10 years in the UK. A successful UK drug policy would in contrast:

- bear down on the illicit use of all drugs, not the harms caused by drug use;
- abandon the harm reduction approach;
- focus treatment on abstinence and rehabilitation;
- include a tougher, better-funded enforcement programme to reduce the supply of drugs.

NOTES:

1. *The Phoney War on Drugs* by Kathy Gyngell is published on Monday 18 May 2009.
2. Kathy Gyngell chaired and authored the *Addictions Reports* of the Social Justice Policy Review for the Conservative Party, published in *Breakdown Britain* in December 2006 and *Breakthrough Britain* in July 2007. She is chair of the Prisons and Addictions Policy Forum at the CPS. She was also the co-author with Ray Lewis of *From Latchkey to Leadership: Channelling the Talents of Inner City Youth*.
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