

Britain: Labour government sacks chief drugs adviser

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Home Secretary Alan Johnson has sacked the government's chief drugs adviser Professor David Nutt for speaking out against official cannabis drugs policy. Johnson's actions were supported by Prime Minister Gordon Brown and the Conservative opposition. However, several members of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD), of which Nutt is chairman, have resigned in protest or threatened to do so. The UK government's chief science adviser, Professor John Beddington, says he supports Nutt's views that cannabis is less harmful than alcohol and tobacco adding, "I think the scientific evidence is absolutely clear cut. I would agree with it."

Johnson told Nutt that recent comments he made were undermining public confidence in the government's drug policy and the independence of the ACMD. Johnson said that his predecessor, Jacqui Smith, had warned Nutt not "to comment or initiate a public debate on the policy framework for drugs" following her decision to reclassify cannabis as a class B hard drug in early 2009. This reclassification came five years after it had been downgraded to the softer class C by then Home Secretary David Blunkett. Smith ignored the ACMD's advice to keep cannabis in class C, stating that she was responding to police pressure and "public concern".

Nutt was attacked for his position of calling for a complete review of drug laws soon after Smith's. He was rebuked in the press for recommending LSD and ecstasy be downgraded from class A and forced to apologise to Smith for his remark that the risk from ecstasy was less than that from riding horses.

Nutt's sacking follows a lecture he gave to the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies (CCJS) at King's College London in July and its publication in the centre's journal last month, where it caught widespread media

attention. His lecture was in line with the "evidence-based" advice that the ACMD—an independent body of top scientists, experts in social care, and police officers—has been advocating over recent years.

The CCJS said that Nutt was not campaigning against government policy, but was trying "to find a way of generating an inclusive public debate that would permit a consensus to emerge over how to approach the problems of harm caused by drugs."

His lecture, "Estimating drug harms: a risky business", began by noting that drugs in the UK are classified into three different categories. Anyone caught in possession of a class A drug faces a maximum of seven years in prison. For class B it is five years and for class C two years. The penalty for supplying class A drugs is life imprisonment, while it is 14 years for supplying class B or C drugs.

Nutt explained, "In recent years the whole process of determining drug classification has become quite complex and highly politicized." He revealed how Smith had asked the ACMD to review the status of cannabis in 2007, claiming there was "a real public concern about the potential mental health effects of cannabis use, particularly the use of stronger forms of the drug, known as skunk."

The impetus for Smith's request had come from the Association of Chief Police Officers' (ACPO) conference that year. Chief Constable Tim Hollis, chairman of the ACPO drugs committee, claimed there was "a broad consensus" for re-classification of cannabis. He continued, "There is growing evidence of the potential harm cannabis can cause, particularly to teenagers. There is a disproportionate risk to young people, particularly from stronger cannabis."

The government strongly denied that Smith intended to go ahead with reclassification regardless of the

ACMD's conclusions. In the event, the ACMD conducted one of the most extensive investigations ever carried out into cannabis in the UK. It concluded that cannabis was a harmful drug, expressed concern about its widespread use and called for a "concerted public health response." Evidence suggested the existence of a "probable weak, causal link" between cannabis and some forms of mental illness.

However, even though cannabis has been around for decades and skunk for 10 years, the incidence of schizophrenia, which is relatively rare in any case, has actually declined. Compared to the substantial risk for lung cancer caused by smoking tobacco, the danger posed by the link between cannabis and psychotic illness is relatively small. The ACMD concluded that "the harms caused by cannabis are not considered to be as serious as drugs in class B and therefore it should remain a class C drug."

Nutt's comments angered the government not only because they cut across its servile relations with the police and the media. His observation of the threat to health from tobacco and alcohol is detrimental to multibillion pound industries on which the government relies for substantial tax revenues and which have numerous interested parties and paid lobbyists around Westminster. Lung cancer currently accounts for 7 percent of all deaths in the country and 22 percent of all deaths from cancer. One person dies of lung cancer almost every 15 minutes in the UK, according to Cancer Research. Emphysema and chronic bronchitis account for over 20,000 deaths each year in the UK, with the vast majority resulting from cigarette smoke.

In his lecture Nutt talked about "the peculiar media imbalance in relation to drugs", providing examples of how certain kinds of drug-related deaths receive greater attention in the press than those arising from alcohol-related causes.

Nutt explained that the ACMD had "tried very hard for at least the last ten years to put together a structure for assessing drug harms" that would categorise all the possible dangers from drugs, including dependent, physical harms, and social harms. It would also turn more attention to alcohol, which "is probably the biggest challenge that we have in relation to drug harms today," he said. Nutt noted that it had been difficult because "it challenged some of the current (mis)perceptions about drugs."

A recent study by the University of the West of England for the charity Alcohol Concern suggests that 90,800 people will die from drinking too much in the next ten years. Alcohol-related deaths went from 3,054 in 1984 to 8,999 in 2008.

Nutt said the purpose of his talk was to try and get everyone "talking in the same language about the same relative measures of harm," as the starting point for public debate.

The government has made it clear that this is the last thing it wants. It has sacked Nutt, intimidated the ACMD and closed down any debate on a drugs policy that has manifestly failed. Although it allowed ACPO—an undemocratic and unelected cabal of top police officers—to "initiate a public debate" in 2007 and subsequently acceded to its demands against all the scientific evidence, it has denied the same right to Nutt.

The *World Socialist Web Site* opposes the criminalisation of cannabis use, while also opposing the growing culture of drug-taking. It is the mounting social crisis and the terrible stresses this places on millions that has ultimately given rise to the drug epidemic in the UK, including the binge drinking that has developed to deadly proportions amongst young people and the vast rise in home consumption of alcohol.

In its 2008 report, the ACMD only scratched at the surface of the reasons why young people start to use cannabis with the single sentence..."to relax, relieve boredom and enhance otherwise mundane everyday activities."

The real debate should be how to transform the conditions for the majority of the population so that life becomes an exciting and fulfilling experience, not a "boring" and "mundane" one to be compensated for by self-medicating using ever larger quantities of alcohol, cannabis and other "recreational drugs".



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