

# Can you bust the media drug myths?

Dec 16 2010

*The 'war on drugs' has been a politically fraught issue in recent decades, with many calling for the decriminalisation of hard drugs as a partial solution. [Charlie Beckett](#) looks at Bob Ainsworth's recent calls for decriminalisation, and investigates why he was unable to do more when he was a Labour Minister in the last government.*



Let's assume for a moment that the Labour former Home Office minister [Bob Ainsworth is right to say the war on drugs is not only futile, but counter-productive](#). He says he found this out while in office. So why didn't he do anything about it then?

Here is what stopped him:

1. Civil servants who would only advise within pragmatic policy parameters
2. The top politicians in his government who would see it as risky and a distraction
3. Government spin doctors who would see it as handing ammunition to the right-wing newspapers

Of course, there are some people who will argue against decriminalisation of drugs on principle and on policy. I think it is reasonable to say that prohibition helps maintain societal norms around what are not healthy substances.

But Ainsworth [thinks](#) that current policy is wrong and like most senior police officers, he wants the law changed.

What is really stopping this happening is the media and specifically the right wing popular press. As the Liberal Democrats have found out in the past, merely to suggest a review of the law is enough to get you depicted as drug peddling lunatics. That is why as Prime Minister, Gordon Brown reversed the classification of cannabis in a desperate attempt to drum up some popularity against all the scientific advice.

New Labour desperately needed credibility on law and order to match the Conservatives long tradition of hand 'em and flog 'em toughness. It was what the British public told pollsters they liked. For the sake of the wider project, Blair adopted one of the greatest political slogans of all time: Tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime.

Unfortunately, the causes of drug crime include the way that it is policed. Getting tough on drugs simply made things worse. People don't stop doing drugs because of jail. Prison is actually where many of them get on to the stuff in the first place.

I think that it is only a Conservative government – with a Liberal component – that can break through this impasse. Ken Clarke wants to get people out of jails right? A liberalisation policy could be packaged as a pragmatic response to the deficit in line with demands from the police for a more sensible approach, with the Lib Dems as political cover. Sick of having your car broken into by druggies? Worried that house prices are lowered by needles in the gutter? Well, let's put heroin on the NHS.

Of course, the delicacy of the Coalition would be vulnerable as the right-wing media would once again accuse the government of caving in to anarchy. But a bold government led by a rational, amiable, Etonian Tory with a nice rural seat could sell this. Stay tough on drunken violence and attacks on the person but deal with drugs in a way that the police and doctors, not the Daily Mail, think will work.

In the long-term this would be both a sensible policy and potentially vote-winning. Convince people that one of the cause of crime is the illegality of drugs. Bob Ainsworth is not the greatest political communicator, but even he makes the case with clarity and conviction. But unfortunately, in the short-term it will always be a low priority for those living their nice closeted Westminster lives. In the midst of the current welter of economically-driven policy, this cause of crime is likely to go unsolved.

*This post [originally appeared](#) on [Charlie Beckett's blog](#) on 16 December.*

[Click here](#) to respond to this article.

Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

**You may also be interested in the following posts (automatically generated):**

1. [The phone-hacking scandals indicate that industry self regulation has failed to safeguard standards and accountability in the news media. A Media Commission is needed.](#)
2. [A Newscorp takeover of BSkyB will not significantly shift media power: blocking the deal could set a poor precedent](#)
3. [Wikileaks: an example of 'new' and 'old' media collaboration. But does freedom of expression trump diplomatic confidentiality?](#)
4. [Taming the feral beasts of the media requires greater transparency from government, but can Downing Street ever be honest?](#)