



A fortnight of chaos left the ACMD in disarray. As it attempts to regroup, DDN talks to Professor David Nutt, the sacked chair at the centre of the dispute.

Watershed for the ACMD?

THE ADVISORY COUNCIL ON THE MISUSE OF DRUGS and the home secretary have just issued a joint statement on ways of working together collaboratively in future – the government’s attempt to patch up a hole that was getting deeper by the day.

Alan Johnson’s dismissal of the ACMD’s chair Professor David Nutt provoked a storm that shook the independent committee to its core. Five members of the council resigned in protest, with the role and relevance of the remaining members being called into question.

The affair began quietly enough, with Nutt’s speech for the Eve Saville lecture in July, which drew media attention when it was published in October as a briefing paper by the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies. Among the detail of the paper, which looked at how to estimate drug harms, Nutt had stated the need for ‘proper debate about evidence and drugs – what the appropriate penalties are and why we aren’t doing more to deal with alcohol’.

In the course of looking at the drug classification system, he criticised the government’s decision to reclassify cannabis to B, ignoring the ACMD’s recommendations that it should remain class C.

For this reason, the home secretary accused his chief drugs advisor of undermining the ACMD’s scientific independence by lobbying for a change of government policy. ‘You cannot have a chief adviser... campaigning against government decisions,’ said Johnson.

Nutt reacted furiously, on his own account and that of the ACMD. ‘Let me be absolutely explicit about this,’ he told *DDN*. ‘The lecture was prepared in cooperation with the Home Office. They actually gave me data. We went through the talk and actually orchestrated it in a way that would be interesting, but also what you might call proper political boundaries.’ Furthermore, he says: ‘I made it very clear that the paper was not presented with my ACMD hat on.’

He adds: ‘My anger, which has been boiling up for the last three years has come out... I don’t believe I crossed the line.’

He likens his situation to *Alice in Wonderland*, with the home secretary as the Red Queen saying ‘the line is where I say it is’.

‘He waits till I move and then he draws the line behind me,’ says Nutt. ‘I’ve no idea what’s going on. I think Alan Johnson was badly advised and that there’s a legacy of antipathy towards me. I think Jacqui Smith hates me – she visibly angered when my name was mentioned on *Question Time*. There are

people at the Home Office who feel that I should have gone then and are using the chance to get at me now.’

But Nutt is not about to disappear. On the contrary, his sacking has convinced him of the need to build on public interest in the case and examine the issues in depth. ‘I’m amazed by how many people have said to me, “thank God, at last someone’s talking the truth”,’ he says.

And that truth, according to Nutt, involves acknowledging that ‘alcohol is the big problem at the moment... keeping the price of alcohol so low is clearly having a huge negative impact on public health.

‘We’ve heard so many platitudes that we’ve got to be hard on drugs, we’ve got to bang people up. But it’s alcohol that’s destroying our city centres – that’s what’s destroying our kids. What we’ve really got to do is deal with alcohol.’

The media interest has been both help and hindrance, he says, as the matrix of drug harm didn’t translate easily into soundbites. Within 30 minutes of doing the *Today Programme* he was on News 24 and the frenzy had not subsided when *DDN* caught up with him just as he finished an interview with BBC Southampton.

‘Most interviewers hadn’t a clue what I was talking about and were saying “so you think we should all take LSD instead of alcohol?” But what I was saying was, if you want to reduce harm in this country there’s no point in worrying about LSD. Focus on alcohol. A lot of the focus on drugs is a way of ignoring alcohol – a sense of doing something, but doing nothing.

‘But talk about the oxygen of publicity! I think the landscape has now shifted. At least people know there’s one person out there that they can trust, who will tell the truth about drugs.

‘People want the truth, they don’t want government rubbish,’ he adds. ‘So I don’t see how the ACMD can continue to be viable because no one will trust them. The independent experts will be the people I presume they’ll come to.’

And the support from colleagues and the public has given Nutt the confidence to consider turning the humiliation of dismissal into an even sharper thorn in the government’s side:

‘If we don’t get an appropriately independent ACMD, I’m going to found an alternative,’ he says. ‘A lot of scientists on the ACMD have agreed to join me and I’ve got a backer who’s prepared to underwrite it. So we can actually do it – we can have an independent think tank advisory group.’ **DDN**