

**DDN** discussed some of the emerging themes from *In somebody else's shoes* – and drug policy in general – with both a Labour and Conservative MP

First up, the outspoken Labour MP for Newport West, Paul Flynn, on joined up working, decriminalisation and the scourge of the target culture



## Moving targets

‘There are far too many organisations, of varying quality and effectiveness and futility. It’s a minefield – nobody, if they were setting up a system, would want to end up with the plethora of organisations that we have at the moment.’

Paul Flynn is talking about the effectiveness of joint working – whether it’s a reality or just a mantra, and whether or not it’s up to the job of meeting the needs of service users. Is streamlining the answer in that case? ‘I think it’s beyond streamlining,’ he says. ‘It needs to be nuked. We’re building up a huge drugs establishment of people with a vested interest in continuing present policies of prohibition, which keep them in employment. The whole thing has just mushroomed, without any resulting improvement in the outcomes. It’s a self-feeding empire that continually swells and becomes more bloated.’

The NTA came in for some criticism at the conference, as having possibly grown too big to be effective – how does he see it fitting in to all of this? ‘Because politicians don’t have the courage to do the intelligent thing on drugs they choose diversions and distractions, and in the absence of policy they spend money,’ he says. ‘It’s consoling for them – they feel they’re actually doing something. The easiest thing to do is to spend money – whether or not it does any good is very doubtful.’

He’s been consistently very outspoken about the prohibitionist approach – is he optimistic that he’ll see a different approach any time soon? ‘I still keep a flicker of hope alive that intelligent politics will emerge one day,’ he says. ‘It’s about whether politics is motivated by intelligent policy or by the need for instant gratification, which is what drives policy at the moment.’

How big a role does the media play in that? ‘Oh, enormous,’ he says. ‘Most politicians want the daily drip feed of adulation from the media, and if they don’t get it they fret and sulk. It’s going along with the lowest common denominator of what the *Daily Mail* thinks, but there is hope that we could get courageous politicians who will speak the truth and produce policies that are practical and rational. It has happened – it’s happened in other countries, so we shouldn’t despair too much. It happened in Portugal in 2001’ (*when that country introduced a law decriminalising possession of illicit substances for personal use – defined as being up to ten days supply – but with criminal penalties still applied to dealers, traffickers and growers of drugs*).

The target culture came in for repeated criticism at *In somebody else's shoes*, with some professionals describing the damaging effect it had had on their working lives and how it shifted the emphasis away from trying to do the best for their clients. ‘I’ll give you an example from my constituency,’ says Paul Flynn. ‘Two of my constituents will be down, according to the target culture, as being great successes of our brilliant anti-drugs policy in prisons, in that they both went to prison as heroin addicts and emerged clean. So the statistics will say this is wonderful – two large ticks in a white box for those two. But when they came out of prison, one of them lived a day and the other lived a week.’

‘They both went back to using heroin and they didn’t have the protection they should have had, for various reasons,’ he continues. ‘The arguments are still going on – who was right, who’s to blame, who should have been informed – but they lost their lives, and it would be quite reasonable to say that they lost their lives because of a system that clearly wasn’t working properly. So the system would say they were two great successes, whereas they were two personal tragedies. The tick box culture is the bane of our lives – it’s about chasing the targets rather beneficial outcomes. It’s distorted priorities.’

Has this become so firmly embedded now that any kind of significant change is unlikely, or might we see a new direction? ‘It’s discredited now, and let’s hope the new direction will be a rational one,’ he says. ‘It’s thoroughly discredited – no one speaks in favour of it any more.’

How does he view the prospects for drugs policy if, as could well be the case, we have a change of government next year? ‘If David Cameron becomes prime minister then he was a very good back bencher on the subject of drugs. He was very good on the home affairs select committee, and the report they did – the one that Chris Mullin produced (*The government's drugs policy: is it working? 2002*) – was a high point of parliament’s treatment of drugs and came up with some good ideas. In terms of if we have a new Labour leader in future, then Alan Johnson I have great admiration for – he’s someone who could well be a great prime minister – and David Miliband, as well, does listen. We continue to live in hope, and I shall be fighting the election on that battle cry next year.’