



## FIGHT THE POWER

Rather than cosying up to political parties, those in the treatment field should be using the coming election as a vital opportunity to put candidates on the spot and demand some answers, says **Andy Stonard**



**OVER THE LAST THREE MONTHS** I have listened to, or heard about, numerous discussions and initiatives on the theme of who to cosy up to and brief in both main political parties for the forthcoming general election. It's not until the eve of an election campaign that you become aware that our field is littered with so many expert political analysts, or how brazen some individuals are in their willingness to ditch their beliefs – and those of their organisation – in case the other side wins.

Why has it come to this? I'd like you to consider the election from a different perspective, and think about what you could do rather than just vote or not. In the UK there are supposed to be some 2m people who attend AA and NA each year. There are, according to government estimates, 750,000 drug users who are in, have been in, or need, treatment. Most of those 2.75m people have families and partners who are affected by their problems. On top of that there are many millions who are told they are drinking hazardously or using drugs – up and down the classification list – that may be a problem. That adds up to an awful lot of people.

From my perspective alcohol and drugs are among the greatest blights affecting every corner of the UK – our homes, our streets, our neighbours. Yet despite all the rhetoric from our politicians and those who represent them through the civil service and national organisations, the problems just increase – alcohol and drug related ill health and crime, estates that become no go areas, alcohol related disorder, our social care systems, family breakdown, accidents and absenteeism at work, the risk to young people. It affects everyone.

So, are the Tories going to spend more than the current government? What is Labour going to do next? Are there any bright ideas from the Liberal Democrats and the others? Whose sound bite is going to sound the sternest, the toughest, or the most compassionate?

Who is going to put the politicians under pressure about drugs and alcohol? What a lobby the 2.75m people mentioned above would make, together with their families and friends, if they asked the following of their potential political candidates:

1. *Please give me your detailed analysis of the alcohol and drug situation in the UK.*
2. *Please send me your detailed strategy and commitment to how to tackle this over the next five years.*
3. *Please tell me what your spending commitment is going to be on alcohol and drugs.*
4. *What laws and statutes do you intend to present to Parliament in relation to alcohol and drugs?*
5. *And please do not flannel – we just want answers to the above, and our votes will depend on them.*

AA and NA are the most successful and impressive self-help groups in the world and changes to how alcohol and drugs are managed hold the key to the major issues of law and order, health and social care. If any party's major plank is going to be based on a minimum price per unit of alcohol, what does that mean to someone on a low income or someone who already has a significant problem? It means more spent on alcohol for the same quantity and less on food or the kids in my analysis. And how does that affect drug markets, especially for young people? My guess is that most of your candidates will not even have thought about that.

Is every DAT (or DAAT) gearing up with their stakeholders and user groups to book a large venue for their local candidates to present themselves and meet with their potential voters? There is a section in the annual plan for each DAT about effective partnerships. Organising high level consultancy days with political candidates – not just an hour or two but a whole day to properly look at the local issues – would tick that box for me and leave most of you in no doubt who to vote for.

We in the field may not agree on everything but we add up to a major potential political lobby. Whether we choose to use that power is down to all of us. But, in the middle of the next Parliament, if things aren't going well, just remind yourself what your contribution was during the election.

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