Barriers to the influence of evidence on policy: are politicians the problem?

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ABSTRACT

Scientists, practitioners and advocates of all persuasions argue that policies on illicit drugs should be based on evidence. Western governments commonly state that they aim for evidence-based policy. Yet many complain that this ambition is more often honoured in the breach. Despite accumulating evidence over decades, apparently rational changes in drugs policy seem as hard to introduce as ever. Why is it impossible to have a rational debate on drugs policy? The media have been blamed for this situation (this may be a particular problem in UK – where currently their single minded pursuit of sensational headlines, unethical and indecent behaviour are laid bare in the deliberations of the Leveson Inquiry). But the public and politicians may also have to take responsibility.

A key problem seems to lie with the interface between drugs policy experts and politicians, especially as this operates at different levels. Frustrated scientists and advocates have been outspoken in criticising politicians for their failure to respect evidence, and for their short-termism and prejudiced attitudes. How does the situation look from the point of view of politicians?

This paper focuses on the situation in the UK to try to cast light on this paradox. It reviews possible explanations and evaluates these, drawing on evidence from documents, debates, interviews and observation. It concludes that the answer may lie not so much with the inadequacies of individual politicians as with the way in which some issues become constructed as contested social problems, the operation of the political system itself, and the roles of symbolism, tribalism and taboos in the conduct of public affairs.
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Introduction

The ideal of evidence-based policy and practice (EBP) is pronounced as a basic premise in much discussion of drugs policy. But evidence may be at variance with politicians’ or public perceptions. For example, as pointed out by researcher Harold Pollak, needle exchange has strong scientific support but weak political support.\(^1\) For this reason, observers complain that the ambition of EBP is more often honoured in the breach. This paper reviews arguments about who are the culprits responsible for this and focuses on the situation in the UK.

When looking for who to blame, as rational changes in drugs policy seem as hard to introduce as ever, one force is singled out pre-eminently - the media.

The role of the media

Keith Hellawell, the first and only British Drug Czar, commented:

‘it is difficult to have a sensible debate on the subject as, by and large, national newspapers limit themselves to discussing the legalisation of cannabis on one side of their divide and prohibition on the other – extreme positions emphasised by single issue politicians, pressure groups and the chattering classes’\(^2\)

The coverage of the issue in the media is blamed for a notable lack of public understanding. Polly Toynbee, the journalist, has commented on public understanding in Britain as being ‘so ignorant’ – this, she feels, is because 80% of the press is sensationalist: as a result, in general on social issues, Britain is one of the least well informed nations.\(^3\)

The *Daily Mail* stands supreme in this regard among newspapers: its attack on liberalism has been identified as a key influence, especially with regard to the issue of crime and drugs.\(^4\)

Nick Davies, the investigative journalist responsible for exposing the truth about the Murdoch empire, which has culminated in the Leveson Inquiry into the network of links between press, police and

\(^1\) Pollak 2007
\(^2\) Hellawell 2002:291
\(^3\) Toynbee 2008
\(^4\) Hough 2008
politicians in Britain, has explained how the process works. Partly this is through straightforward misinformation: for example, the last government told its UK domestic audience that troops in Afghanistan would eradicate the production of heroin - while at the same time saying quite different things to Afghan farmers. Chris Mullin, former MP and one time Chair of the Home Affairs Select Committee, commented similarly on the mysterious appearance of an entirely unachievable fifth pledge in the Drugs White Paper after No 10 decided to insert ‘halving Afghanistan opium production’ without telling the Minister concerned. Other examples could be cited. Nick Davies describes the well-known vilification of Brian Paddick (former senior Police Officer in Lambeth south London) and the fabrication of a story about a man’s death being due to cannabis.

Another feature of the process is through amplification of messages, leading to a distortion of perceptions and helping to construct dominant overarching narratives. The media ‘operated as an echo chamber,’ working to construct what Nick Davies calls flat earth news. So in the drugs field:

‘the heroin story appears to be true. It is widely accepted as true. It becomes a heresy to suggest that it is not true. The most powerful institutions on the planet insist that it is true but it is riddled with falsehoods, distortion and propaganda.’

A further aspect of the process analysed by Davies is through adherence to the principle of balance, which dictates supposedly fair and independent coverage in the BBC and other outlets with a public service mission. Davies describes what happened when he was making a Channel Four programme on heroin, presenting what he regarded as a truthful but maverick view: ‘I was put under extreme pressure by Channel Four to include material to contradict’ his main argument, because of this code of seeking balance. ‘The demand for balance has become a gateway through which spokesmen for the consensus are invited to enter our stories with their comments, regardless of whether they are false, distorted or propaganda.’ Through this process, orthodoxies are maintained and it is hard for other narratives to break what could be seen as a form of cultural path dependency. As path dependency exists with regard to the laws, practices and institutions of drugs policy so it exists in explanations and argumentation.

This is particularly galling given the hypocrisy of journalists pouring vitriol on people for behaviours which are normal in their own circles: ‘I know a fair bit about sex and drugs and hypocrisy in Fleet Street: executives whose papers support the war against drugs while shoving cocaine up their nostrils in the office toilets.’

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5 Davies 2009
6 Davies 2009: 247
7 Mullin 2009
8 Davies 2009: 387
9 Davies 2009: 31
10 Davies 2009: 32
11 Davies 2009: 132
12 Davies 2009: 133
13 Davies 2009: 3
The *Daily Mail* has been mentioned already as leading a campaign against what are constructed as 1960s, permissive, liberal values. This paper has been particularly influential among politicians, mainly because it is read by key marginal swing voters.\(^{14}\) It is important however to distinguish between different parts of the media and not tar all with the same brush. And not all media are treated the same by government, as Davies describes: ‘I’ve had the chastening experience of publishing long stories on public policy only to be told by senior civil servants “very interesting but it won’t make the slightest difference”. Now if you were on the *Mail...”*’\(^{15}\) He goes on to comment that ‘politicians work hard socially as well as politically to make the *Mail* their friend.’\(^{16}\) Hence,

> ‘in the course of serving its readers, the *Daily Mail* has had a significant impact on almost every political issue of the day – Europe, crime and policing, the NHS, binge drinking, the MMR vaccine, GM foods, asylum and immigration, drugs, fuel tax, homosexuality, trade unionism, human rights.’

The tactics of the *Daily Mail* have also been described as particularly *aggressive* and so have frightened governments, partly justifying the appointment of ‘spin doctors’ like Alistair Campbell to rebut adverse media coverage. For example, Keith Hellawell commented, ‘I was surprised by the reporters’ aggression - “is your appointment anything more than a cheap publicity exercise by the Government?” “have you ever taken illegal drugs?”’\(^{17}\) David Nutt (former Chair of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs [ACMD]) has reported to the Leveson Inquiry how he was treated by the media in the week he was sacked. The *Sun* hacked into three of his children’s facebook pages; they attacked his son, saying he used cannabis and showed a picture of him naked in the snow; and Nutt’s daughter (who does not drink) was said to be drunk.\(^{18}\)

Because of their influential role, other groups aiming to influence government and public opinion have to establish relations with the media. The public relations (PR) profession has grown accordingly.\(^{19}\)

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\(^{14}\) Davies explains that the *Mail* is not a defender of the establishment or right-wing: it is principally responding to [and thus shaping] its readers’ views. For the *Mail*, the values of the traditional family are key. ‘The *Mail* is a perfect commodity designed to be sold to a particular market of lower middle class men and women ... it sells its readers what they want to see in the world’ (that is, the values of the 1950s). The construction of news works also through rejecting stories which don’t fit into this template, [as has been analysed by other researchers showing how only certain drug related deaths are publicised in the press]. Davies 2009: 370

\(^{15}\) Davies 2009: 365

\(^{16}\) Davies 2009: 366

\(^{17}\) Hellawell 2002:298

\(^{18}\) Nutt 2011

\(^{19}\) Nutt 2011 describes how the Humberside police held an *international* press launch to draw attention to ‘two deaths from mephedrone’.
The role of the drugs lobby

A feature of political life in recent decades has been the increasing influence of lobbyists. They now operate as a source of expertise and information for government. Their source of funding is important with regard to their degree of independence. Over time they have become more business-like. Networking is very important to the sector and they will form coalitions on particular issues.

The ‘drugs lobby’ has recognised that this is the way the system works so they try to influence the construction of news themselves. The drugs lobby also tries to work beneath the surface to influence the shape of policy development and implementation. Pressure groups can play a key role in scrutinising and monitoring government performance and their members thus become part of the political class.

In fact, most lobbying is a rather dull business, carried on between two sets of bureaucrats. Pressure groups employ professional staff so a lot of negotiation takes place with relatively junior or middle ranking officials. Sometimes Ministers are involved, usually a junior Minister. Junior Ministers’ influence has increased in British government in recent decades. It is recognised that individual ministers can make a difference. 20

The process of holding consultations provides a key arena where lobbyists try to get their ideas and proposals across. ‘Consultations are where science and the real world collide’ 21 For example, the Coalition’s Drugs Strategy was announced on December 8 2010 and a consultation was held on it. There were 1800 responses.

Another route to influence is through direct, close and personal links between lobbyists and particular MPs. For example a favourite is to use Early Day Motions (EDM) to express concern about an issue of the day. These are often drafted by pressure groups to raise a specific issue and the process involves mobilizing signatures. This is one example of the hard, day to day work of building political action within parliament, aiming to gradually influence MPs and others in parliament, test the balance of opinion on an issue and educate MPs and advisors - and the general public too if an EDM is taken up and publicized by journalists.

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20 For example, currently James Brokenshire is a key junior Minister in the drugs field. In Opposition, he showed particular interest in abstinence-based rehabilitation for young people, early intervention and concern with intergenerational problems regarding poverty and drugs, outcomes based approaches, and engaging parents in drugs education. These themes are now distinctive in the Coalition government’s recovery agenda.

21 Public health expert speaking at SSA Conference 2009
The role of public opinion

Public opinion on drugs is often falsely represented. But public opinion is divided and not of one voice and changes over time:

‘While there are important distinctions between use of cannabis and use of opiates, there are also grounds for thinking that attitudes towards drug misuse and drug policy more generally may be distinctive among those who have at least some experience of illegal drug use. Drug misuse remains a minority pursuit across the Scottish population as a whole ... [yet] Almost half (47%) of Scottish adults know a friend or family member who has used illegal drugs – an increase from 41% in 2001. . . . Exposure to heroin problems within the local community – as measured by awareness of discarded needles as a problem – was relatively rare... this figure rose to 21% in the most deprived areas of Scotland. . . . Findings on attitudes to the legal status of cannabis suggest something of a reversal in the increasingly tolerant attitudes recorded by the British Social Attitudes survey in the 1980s and 1990s and the Scottish Social Attitudes survey in 2001. Support for legalising cannabis fell from 37% in Scotland in 2001 to 24% in 2009. Even among those who had themselves tried cannabis, support for its legalisation fell from 70% in 2001 to 47% in 2009. . . . These shifts in attitudes were particularly marked among those aged 18-24... in 2009 fewer people accepted the more general statement that “we need to accept that using illegal drugs is a normal part of some people’s lives” than did so in 2001 (25% compared with 40%). . . . There was no consensus amongst the public on what approach the government should prioritise to tackle heroin use in Scotland – 32% chose “tougher penalties for those who take heroin”, 32% “more help for people who want to stop using heroin” and 28% “more education about drugs”. However, four out of five (80%) agreed that “the only real way of helping drug addicts is to get them to stop using drugs altogether”. . . . Attitudes in Scotland towards the legalisation of cannabis and prosecution for its possession have become less liberal since the turn of the century, reversing a trend of increasing liberalisation in attitudes as measured across Britain over the preceding two decades. Research using data from the British Social Attitudes survey has indicated that this at least in part reflects an increase in the perceived potency of cannabis and growing concern about its long-term health impacts. . . .’

Malcolm Dean, another journalist, has noted that ‘the demonisation of drug users by the media has had serious detrimental effects on the quality of policy and debate.’ Culturally for a long time drugs have been associated with dirt and disease and danger. ‘Drugs’ is not a popular topic to discuss among the general public. Drugs experts have experienced that wrinkling of the nose and physical drawing back when the word is used in polite circles. Mentioning it is often seen as distasteful and many people do not want to get involved. Few among researchers, academics, doctors and social workers want to touch the drugs issue. This applies to civil servants too: one informant reported how early in the New Labour years, LSE research had been carried out on the 88 most deprived areas. Those involved agreed that

22 Cf poster from Liberal Democrat researcher at issdp conference 2011.
23 Executive Summary Scottish Social Attitudes Survey 2009
24 Dean 2012 : 197
whatever policies were adopted to deal with multiple deprivation in those areas, nothing would work if they did not get to grips with the drugs problem. Twenty departments and officials sat round the table and were asked ‘who would take the lead on this – who will take responsibility?’ None were willing to take it on.\(^25\)

Another close observer noted that these views were shared by politicians, commenting on the ‘sheer distaste among politicians dealing with this issue – they tend to treat drugs at arms length – it is not a popular topic in the political classes. Consequently impact on policy debate comes from high profile actors and links to the media - without that it is a lost cause.’\(^26\)

**Blaming the politicians**

‘In this political arena a virulent disease known as “Green Room Syndrome” is epidemic, where strongly held beliefs on reform disappear as soon as the record button is pressed for broadcast. This is something we have experienced again and again: fellow debaters who privately admit to agreeing with us in the Green Room before a media interview, only to feign shock and outrage at our position once the cameras and microphones are on. There are many in politics and public life who understand intellectually that the prohibition of drugs is unsustainable but who default in public to moral grandstanding and emotive appeals to the safety of their children.’\(^27\)

*Drugs researchers and drugs policy experts* often express a low opinion of politicians, seeing them as short-termist in their outlook, with a short attention span, ill-informed and easily swayed by the media, and generally lacking in *courage*.

*The public* too currently in UK hold a low opinion of politicians: ‘In most people’s view, politicians tell lies, are incompetent, and have their snouts in the trough.’\(^28\)

This view of their colleagues is shared by so-called *maverick, independent MPs* like Paul Flynn. He has said that the failure of our drug policy is oceanic and represents a failure of the political class from 1971 onwards demonstrating the idiocy of politicians and the existence of a hypocritical legislature. Part of the problem lies with *fear* of the tabloids. The tabloid press encourages politicians to be *tough* so politicians try to *appear to be doing something* - leading to laws and policies on drugs. What is needed instead is for more *courage* among politicians, to do what is right not what is popular.\(^29\)

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25 ex civil servant 2010  
26 Senior civil servant speaking in personal capacity, Prague 2010  
27 Kushlick 2007. See also Tree 2010: ‘those who have worked on this issue know one of the most cynical secrets in Washington: many elected officials... are willing to acknowledge the fundamental failure of the drug war in private but continue to vote in favour of it when the yeas and nays are called...because it is the quintessential “third rail” political issue...[political suicide and attracting] negative smear ads’.  
28 Guardian editorial 21 4 2012  
29 Paul Flynn 2008
Police representatives too have sometimes deplored politicians ‘headline grabbing’ to show how tough they can be – hence it is thought the whole cannabis classification debate. This ‘headline grabbing populism of current politicians’ is deplored and some have argued there is a need to take politics and self-interest out of the debate. 30

These views are shared by leaders of pressure groups who criticise the superficial approach of politicians: politicians get an idea, respond to something in the press without thought for any evidence or whether there will be any unintended consequences. 31

Pollsters who closely observe British politics emphasise that policies are about winning elections. They too refer to the ‘short-termism’ of politicians: 22 months is the average span of a Minister. People in power are in a hurry and are interested ‘in proof not truth’. Again they note that the media influence people strongly. 32

Sage civil servants too comment that Ministers do not look to the long term: ‘well you know you are asking them to sow oak trees for their grandchildren’ – and this they will not do. 33

A key theme in these criticisms is of the abysmal level of discussion of the drugs issue in public life. Most drugs researchers, professionals, practitioners and lobbyists – anyone who knows anything about the topic - despair of the poor quality of discussion on radio or television. Politicians agree: ‘we really must get away from flinging insults when discussing the matter... it will be a great shame if we cannot have a more serious debate on that most serious issue’. 34

Another element in the discourse around drugs is the use of cant – ‘parroting arguments.’ The term ‘cant’ refers to society’s clichés and the drug debate is full of these. Some politicians like Caroline Lucas are aware of this problem: ‘sadly any debate on drug strategy is all to often derailed by knee jerk reaction and an assertion that attempting to question the existing prohibition based approach is tantamount to dishing pills out like candy to school children’ and ‘I do not think any hon Member is suggesting that we want to give a message that drugs are okay. One of the things that hinder the debate is attributing to one another positions that we do not actually espouse.’ 35

Experts also condemn the trivialising of the debate: I find it ‘very depressing – I have been in drug policy for 15 years. When people present arguments for regulation – ie to treat drugs like alcohol and tobacco – these are seen as arguments for legalisation.’ 36

30 Police Chief Superintendent 2008
31 Crook 2011
32 Page 2002
33 Anonymous interview 2008; see also report from HoC Public Administration Committee April 2012 deploring long term strategic thinking from government and focus on short term.
34 Bob Ainsworth Column 343WH
35 Col 359WH
36 Col 361WH
37 Leading drugs policy actor Prague 2010
Politicians are criticised as being ignorant and for preferring anecdotal information:

‘politicians now claim to know more than scientists... politicians gather evidence by anecdote and chance encounter.’

Another key theme is of the cowardice of politicians. But this does not stand up to scrutiny as a general comment. New Labour did take on some contentious issues in its early days – the government was brave on some topics [even foolhardy where military interventions were concerned]. In its first term the New Labour government had a strong public health agenda and took action on health inequalities and on smoking. So is there something especially toxic about the drugs question which frightens politicians? It has often been noted that it is ex Ministers, ex police officers, ex civil servants and so on who speak out. Why were they not able or willing to do this when in office?

Bob Ainsworth has explained this in the following way:

‘many people ask, as they did in the media this morning, why on earth I did not do or say the things that I am advocating now when I was in government. I had a choice to make. ... My own party disagrees with what I am saying so my choice - had I wanted to go further than what I was allowed to do within the limitations of collective responsibility - would have been to resign... [the choice then was either to resign or] stick with it and make some small improvements...’

Similarly: ‘asked whether the fact that all three parties were talking tough was a sign of the bankruptcy of the debate, Mr Oaten [Lib Dem spokesman] replied with disarming candour: “I think it is a sign that we are all fairly scared of the Mail and Express. With an election approaching, it’s hard in this climate to be able to talk as openly as you might like about what you believe are solutions.’

In his diary for Tuesday 25 February 2003, Chris Mullin describes how that day he went ‘To Thames House Millbank with half a dozen members of the Home Affairs Committee for our first meeting with the fearsome sounding head of MI 5 Eliza Manningham- Buller... She hinted but didn’t quite say, that she might favour legalising and regulating drugs; but wouldn’t be drawn when I pressed her except to say that a lot of chief constables were privately sympathetic to legalising’.

Does this all go back to fear of the media? UKDPC (a think tank) - drawing on case studies of the cannabis reclassification story, the rise and risks of mephedrone, and the sacking of David Nutt as chair of ACMD - conclude that this is so: ‘government’s decisions on drug policy are heavily influenced by its expectations of how the media will view its actions’ and they state their concern ‘that the reporting of

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38 Nutt 2011
39 1998 white paper Smoking Kills: the first tobacco control strategy; in 2000 smoking treatment services were established.
40 Column 342WH
41 Dean 2012: 195
42 Mullin 2009 :366
stories relating to drugs can introduce exaggerations and inaccuracies that create unnecessary pressure on policymakers to quickly take particular policy decisions on the basis of insufficient evidence.  

Drugs are used by governments to signal their overall position with regard to sets of values and to try to gain support from key opinion leaders. With regard to the reclassification of cannabis when Gordon Brown became Prime Minister in 2007, ‘several media commentators interpreted this move as a policy offering to win the support of the Daily Mail.’  

Malcolm Dean, a veteran journalist and commentator on social issues, observes: ‘ministers adopt postures in anticipation of how the media will respond to an issue . . . Ministers know what the tabloids want and too frequently on major social issues – drugs, asylum, law and order – policy is adjusted accordingly.’ And, he says, there has been a long tradition of drugs being used by the media to stereotype, vilify and sensationalise drug abuse.  

One experienced drugs researcher and advocate has come round to sharing these analyses, commenting: ‘I never believed Sam Friedman with his argument about scapegoating - but I do see it more now - that it is very convenient in many countries for politicians to hold these opinions. Also they can do so because some politicians have never seen a real live drug user – or sat around the table with them. And once you set up that trap of drugs as the source of all evil, if they try to break away, they get accused of being soft on drugs’.  

For advocates therefore an important part of their strategy is to try to get politicians to use a different language and begin to see the people involved with drugs differently.  

Roy Greenslade, a media expert, writing in Druglink, observed that to understand how these influences work, it is necessary to understand the interrelationships between press, police and politicians: ‘each of these institutions, working in a loose partnership, tend to cloud the issue creating myths rather than informing the public about reality.’ What emerges from studies of the lobbying process in politics is that in general the richer and more powerful the interest, the higher the level of access: Murdoch gained direct access to Number Ten, the drugs lobby generally have to make do with middle level contacts, except where high status individuals provide access or additional funds are available through philanthropists like George Soros.

43 UKDPC 2012:3-4
44 UKDPC also express concern about the tone of coverage of people with drug dependency problems which adds to the stigma faced by this group with damaging effects on their likelihood of taking up and responding to treatment. Similarly a review by ihra of press coverage of drugs and drug users found that the junkie term was frequently used; that in the coverage of stories about Amy Whitehouse the stories involved caricatures, stereotypes and hurtful language; and that they often included attempts at moral indignation with reference to drug users as undeserving and professionals as misguided.
45 Dean 2012: 200;
46 Dean 2012: 165
47 Dean 2012: 165-6
48 Policy advocate interview 13 February 2009
49 quoted in Dean 2012: 166
50 This was a very prescient observation given the three PPPs of the Levinson inquiry.
Malcolm Dean gives a detailed account of the shenanigans around the publication of the Runciman Report. 51 Government Ministers (especially Jack Straw as Home Secretary) tried to manipulate the press - but attempts in this case backfired. The Mail did not behave as expected, partly because Ruth Runciman herself was very well-connected in the Establishment, and using her charm and ability, was able to influence the editor of the Daily Mail. Dean refers to this incident as an ‘unexpected outburst of media liberalism.’ 52

Analysis of this case shows that ‘blaming the media’ is too broad brush – there are differences among different newspapers and newspapers do not always conform to type. It was also helpful that the Runciman Inquiry had anticipated the argument that public opinion was correctly represented by the views of editors and had commissioned a MORI survey, which showed clear public support at that time for a more liberal approach to soft drugs.

However the Labour government was not influenced by the media in this case. With just over a year to go to an election, they judged that they must not allow themselves to be outflanked by Conservative law and order critics (evidenced in a leaked Cabinet discussion). 53 54

There is evidence that much time and effort is devoted by governments to manipulating the front page, which can explain why certain initiatives were announced when they were and in what form:

**Sunday 26 September 1999** ‘The Sunday papers are full of “TB tells GB: You’ll never be PM”. . . our aim has been to knock the story out by coming up with a better one. So, with half an hour to go before TB’s appearance [on Breakfast with Frost] we decided to launch a war on drugs. . . . we decided to announce that the Queen’s Speech would include a Bill that could bring in mandatory testing after arrest for suspected criminals, and new drug treatment schemes. Not a bad story…we had an hysterical scene of everybody running around trying to ring Jack Straw and Keith Hellawell … to warn them of what was coming in a few minutes’. 55

Similarly ‘in my Whitehall days we came to expect an autumn missive from No 10.’ The PM would signal that he wanted a new policy: ‘the detailed content of the bill was less important to the PM than the fact it was there to announce.’ 56

Thus what happens also depends on timing: the electoral cycle 57 and the battle with alternative parties are key forces in this complex game.

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51 This process of instant rebuttal continued over time: for example when the RSA report was published in 2007, like Runciman the main thrust of the RSA report – reclassification – was rejected by the government on the day of publication.
52 Dean 2012: 179
53 Dean  2012: 181-2
54 ‘Labour’s response to Hague’s new moves was immediate. Number 10 called in the father and stepmother of Leah Betts . . . The drugs minister and drugs tsar were ordered to attend Downing Street to meet the Betts and recant their liberal words “loudly and humbly” ’ Dean 2102: 184
55 Price 2005 :147
56 Tom Clark Guardian 18 April 2012 ‘Poor Policies that refuse to die’
Dean concludes that governments ‘have been too intimidated by the tabloids, too worried about what opposition parties would do, too ready to talk tough when in reality they were weakly bowing to what they wrongly believed was a populist agenda.’

Criticisms of politicians then are that they are unwilling to take risks or waste political capital on the drugs issue. Political scientists who know the political parties well say ‘there are plenty of reasons why leaders see change as unnecessary and / or risky.’ Mark Easton, another journalist, explains the influence of cultural orthodoxies, invisible ideological boundaries, the settled view in the court of public opinion and the role of accepted wisdom: ‘to stray into such minefields may be regarded as political suicide.’ ‘When it comes to Britain’s relationship with opium and other recreational drugs, the walls of the debate have not shifted for half a century. A towering cultural orthodoxy has been constructed around an accepted view that such substances are evil, a malevolent force that must be eradicated by uncompromising use of the criminal justice system.’

Others see this as simply a reflection of politicians’ dogmatism: ‘change in policy is not going to happen - because they will not admit their basic premises are false.’

Others see the main factor as the desire for a quick fix: ‘Politicians want quick cures, want measurable outcomes – get people off drugs and back to work for example. . . but studies show relapse, after giving up injecting even after one or five years.’

The views of members of the political class

Close observers of politicians have concluded that politicians are essentially self-interested and that personal ambition is the key driver for many successful politicians, particularly those who reach the heights: ‘change at that level will only come when those who are at that level are frightened by their voters and feel that carrying on with the present system of drug control will endanger their seats - if MPs’ jobs or reputations are involved - are endangered’. Observers report that Ministers are never interested in evaluations of policies of previous Ministers – they always want to put their own stamp on a policy.

57 Example of the influence of elections on policies:- May 2005 election = Drugs Act 2005 which allowed government to look tough on drugs, thus DTTOs; ‘most informed observers believed it was rushed through Parliament to protect ministers from Tory charges of being soft on drugs’ Dean 2012: 193
58 Dean 2012: 204
59 One interviewee commented on how the role of media has changed since the 1980s and how much more vulnerable to red top scrutiny drug policy is now compared with what it was (interview with drug policy expert 30 November 2009)
60 Lancet editorial - ‘cannabis causes anxiety in politicians.’
61 Bale 2010: 366
62 Easton 2012 :155
63 Ibid :156
64 Policy advocate speaking at issdp conference 2011
65 Leading addiction doctor speaking at NDIC Glasgow 2009
66 Interview with policy reform advocate April 8 2009
Those close to the action report how the press can be used to fight internal battles: Keith Hellawell became aware that ‘It was clear they wished me to go and were using the media to achieve their ends... late in the evening of that day, a well respected journalist on a newspaper that supported Labour telephoned to ask “have you seen tomorrow’s papers? ... All the Murdoch papers have crucified you” - Why? - “You must have trodden on some important toes”’.

The TB v GB fights are famous but there were, in the New Labour government (and no doubt in other administrations) tensions at micro level within government. Some of these have been reported by Keith Hellawell. While his report is of course seen from his own viewpoint, there can be little doubt about rivalries and that briefings and competitions could become vicious: for example, “A Secretary of State annoyed at a derogatory remark I made about his officials squared up to me for a fight, physically pushing me and warning that it was dangerous to “get on my wrong side”’.

Rivalry of this sort was mentioned by several interviewees and raises the issue of micro politics – how rivalry between different departments (over for example their budgets or between Ministers about the status and importance of their department) could influence policy outcomes. Especially in this period the battle for Home Office supremacy figured but the ongoing tension between the Home Office and Department of Health has been a feature of UK drugs policy since its inception and only complicated by the appearance of new agencies like the Cabinet Office, UKADCU and the NTA.

Some commentators consider that the political complexion of a government is less important than the particular personality of the Home Secretary. How policies develop is not just about political party, it is also very much about the individual Home Secretary and the mission they have been given by their government. For example, one Minister –(‘Jack boot Straw’) was thought to have followed up on policies ‘because this was the political job he was given - to continue with a fairly hard line Home Affairs approach – that was the job he was given – I don’t think it was a very natural job for him - they were noises he had to make’.

Observers reported on what they saw as the declining influence of the ‘mandarin class’ who had in the past paid closer attention to experts. In particular in these years, there was the development of the Prime Minister’s private office. Under Tony Blair, both Jonathon Powell and Alistair Campbell aimed to control the civil service from the centre and the ‘politicisation of the civil service’ sometimes led to war between special advisors and civil servants. Particularly with regard to drugs and crime policies, the view was that formerly there was a cosy relationship between policy research in the Home Office and policy development via a small circle of experts with access to grants and policy. External factors led to a policy change. In the 1980s and 1990s, radical criminologists regrouped as ‘new realists’ and influenced New Labour to take crime seriously, leading to a rapid and alarming change in policy.

67 Hellawell 2002: 356
68 Hellawell 2002: 334
69 Interview with ex civil servant Friday April 11 2008
70 Hough 2008
Policing experts took the view that ‘in the last 20 years policy has been driven by populism especially re cannabis . . . the two main parties have been trying to out bid each other on toughness.’ These experts observed that law and order became a political issue with Mrs Thatcher in 1979. Previously the agreed approach was bi-partisan and left to professionals. Since then drugs has become linked to crime because it is seen as a useful topic to highlight in electoral campaigns. Drugs and crime played key roles in securing a New Labour victory in 1997: ‘During the lead up to the 1997 General Election I received a call at home from one of Tony Blair’s personal aides, soon known as spin doctors - “Tony’s giving a speech on drugs in Aberdeen tomorrow” she said “He’s looking for a new angle, and would like to say that if he’s elected he’ll appoint a Drugs Tsar. What would be your response?”’

The increased attention given to drugs under New Labour had a marked effect on the civil service. Increased numbers were employed in this field and it received increased attention, not without some regret: ‘drugs are now rising up the agenda – it used to be a quiet backwater.’

In fact initially New Labour drugs strategy was seen as a very evidence-based policy. Thus it was not the case that politicians were not concerned with evidence. These years saw a big increase in funding for research. The Drugs Strategy was influenced considerably by research such as NTORS and similar studies by Jeremy Cold and Malcolm Ramsey on an out-patient methadone programme and its crime-reducing effect. It was a defining feature of New Labour that it embraced EBP symbolised by the ‘what works mantra’. However the type of evidence which would be most influential was not necessarily the traditional form. It was clear that ‘cost effectiveness must be a priority’ as decisions on policies were closely linked to the Treasury Spending Reviews. And policies had to begin to show effectiveness quickly: ‘politicians do not have long time horizons.’ This indicates the problems posed for rational policy-making and those charged with implementation: politics moves too quickly - or at

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71 Policing Policy Forum February 2010
72 Hellawell 2002: 295
73 interview with civil servants 14 June 2000
74 The drugs-crime link was not an irrational notion. The 1992 BCS included a question on this and comparisons of trends were possible via a series of surveys in 1994, 1996, and 1998. The New Adam study was a key initiative which showed the fact of a drugs- crime link: this played a large part in focusing government minds. For policy this was the key question: ‘government had interest in unravelling that connection’. NL policy was based on another ‘fact’ - that ‘treatment works’ (or the belief that it did). In this regard it could be argued that politicians had too much respect for expert opinion. The focus was on getting drug misusing offenders into treatment and out of crime; ‘we know treatment works’ – this idea was sold to NL politicians who were perhaps too trusting – they committed a lot of political capital to this policy. In 2004 drugs was still a key political priority under TB: the PM headed the accountability chain and drugs was one of his top three government priorities; the head of the drug unit met the Prime Minister quarterly; there was a Ministerial Cabinet Sub Committee - chaired by Home Secretary - and a cross departmental group of senior officers – chaired by the Permanent Secretary at the Home Office. In the early days of the NL drugs strategy, a Research Information Group was set up with the aim to link information and evidence to the drugs strategy. This RIG included all government departments with an interest in the drugs strategy: CSO, Home Office, Customs and Excise, DH, DfEE, the 3 Celtic countries – Scotland Wales and Northern Ireland. It was unwieldy and got nowhere - RIG had links to the social exclusion unit. At this time NL took the view that social exclusion leads to problem drug use but after a time they encountered frustration that research results were slow to come through.
75 Halpern 2010
76 Observation by civil servant 28 April 2003
least, the time scales of evidence collection and decisions are frequently not joined up. Key approaches to drugs policy research (especially cost effectiveness studies and robust evaluations) take time and involve elaborate evaluations. This competes with politicians’ interests: ‘they have strong instincts and want to be seen to be doing something’. Government Ministers might ignore some evidence, preferring to rely on personal experience.

Close observers note that ‘Ministers worry about what is going to blow up’ – they fear being caught out. They are mainly interested in what they can see through. If they can demonstrate achievements then this helps their promotion – again requiring a relatively short-time scale between policy action and effect: ‘public health goals are long term, politicians are short term.’ Turnover of politicians in office is critical here: in recent years, Ministers have been helicoptered in at frenetic speed and are usually not interested in the previous Minister’s pet project: a new Minister arrives with big idea, wants a Big Bill – to make his name.77

So politicians, it is thought, do want evidence and they do respect it. But the type and timing of evidence may differ from that produced ab initio by scientists via their own disciplined trajectories. And drugs as an issue may link to different questions and frameworks. For example, New Labour’s main interest initially was in the link between social exclusion and drugs: there is ‘concern at New Deal about the rump who are not benefiting - are they unacceptable to employers because of drug use?’78

Politicians at a high level can take action if they recognise a problem. For example, ‘at the time of Mrs Thatcher’s government, we (ACMD) said, harm reduction is what we need in this country - I know that it went all the way to Cabinet who were horrified – but they took a deep breath and implemented it – (the Conservatives have a rather noble history in this regard but they don’t remember it or even know it).79

The New Labour government’s interest in the topics of inequality, social exclusion, drugs and crime was advantageous for drug treatment and was deliberately fostered at the time by the drugs lobby. Key individuals acted as ‘consummate politicians’ to form an alliance with New Labour to expand drug treatment services, aiming at step by step, pragmatic reform of policy and practice.

Paul Hayes, later to head the new National Treatment Agency (NTA) outlined in a key conference address how the drugs agenda was driven by concerns about crime. He forcefully argued that this pays for services. Drug users are not popular. The public will not pay for services unless they are seen to be a threat to public safety. The concerns of ordinary people and politicians have to be acknowledged. There was public anger about drugs and crime and the Home Secretary [then Jack Straw] ‘sees himself representing Blackburn not Hampstead’. These issues were part of the reason New Labour had been elected: crime was seen as the cause of social collapse not just as a symptom. Hayes referred also to radical criminologists’ recognition that crime has victims [this being so especially among the working

77 Toynbee 2008
78 Interview with civil servant June 2000
79 Interview with drug policy expert 30 November 2009
class thus associating a strong crime agenda with class interests. ‘Nothing works’ theories in academia are counterproductive: ‘the Treasury will go for the cheapest if nothing works’. The New Labour criminal justice strategy represented the politics of populism and its emphasis on concepts of moral responsibility and opportunity was consistent. Hayes observed that the 1991 move away from prisons had come at a high price for the Conservatives – the lessons had been learnt by both Labour and the Conservatives. The drugs lobby needed to recognise political reality.

This strategy involved the drugs lobby in being somewhat economical with the facts. Those involved saw themselves as playing an astute political game – but they were criticised by others. Critics commented that since 1997, the most visible initiatives in British drug policy targeted problem drug users involved in acquisitive crime. However the relation between illicit drug use and property crime was generally exaggerated and over simplified: for example there might be about four million illicit drug users in any one year – 5% or less of these are PDUs – giving 150,000 PDUs and 70,000 serious PDUs.

There was a brief change in the political climate in 2001 with regard to cannabis but things backtracked thereafter, as has been well documented. In general, as outlined by Hough, some clear tacit rules with bi-partisan support governed drugs policies in the 1990s and 2000s: 1. talk tough on drug issues. 2. focus on crime-related issues. 3. oppose any relaxation of drug legislation. and 4. advocate abstention and practice harm-reduction by stealth.

Since 2008, in UK, however, considerable repositioning has been going on regarding drugs. With the arrival of a Coalition Government, the backlash against methadone has increased along with the rise of a recovery agenda: some think the ‘word recovery has been hijacked.’ A number of factors led to this change, including some questioning by treatment providers themselves: ‘Some psychiatrists feel all they do all day is sign scripts.’ Some thought that the quality of drug treatment was rapidly decreasing with the rapid increase in quantity.’ A number of addiction psychiatrists thought this decline was because of a reduction in medical addiction services with contracts going instead to VCOs.

Expert opinion was divided: one in particular was seen as ‘giving the public what they want to hear.’ Specialists felt it was impossible to discuss the complex issue of drugs treatment in public – it was impossible to get across in a 30 second soundbite on radio or television. ‘What is treatment expected to do? Public expectations are for a safe complete detox, to reduce the use of medical services, eliminate

80 Radical criminologists like Jock Young mobilised evidence from local surveys to influence policy development in labour circles.
81 Hayes 27 April 2000
82 Hough 2001
83 ‘In January 2004, cannabis was downgraded from a Class B to a Class C drug. This was surprisingly brave. Mo Mowlam and Clare Short had been among the ministers publicly slapped down in earlier days for even suggesting cannabis policy should be rethought’ Toynbee and Walker 2005:220
84 Hough 2001
85 Comment from leading medical practitioner discussing the Scottish Road to Recovery document at ndic Glasgow 2009
86 Comment from addiction psychiatrist at SSA Conference York November 2009
87 Comment from addiction psychologist at SSA Conference York November 2009
88 Comment made at NIDC Glasgow 2009
crime, return users to employment and eliminate family disruption.’

Others commented, ‘expectations of treatment are both too much and too little in the addiction field.’

The turning point came when such complex mixes of evidence could not compete with the power of a killer fact – that only 3% of those in drug treatment emerged pure and abstinent within one year.

The drugs lobby saw that the wind was changing: ‘a lot of colleagues are actively talking to politicians – a steady stream are beating a path to the Tories’ door’

The politicians’ defence

We have seen that there is variation among politicians and their views can change over time. In general, politicians are office holders who are not free or able to act as individuals: they have responsibilities, especially to their constituents and parties. Politicians have different aims, values, agendas and priorities from those of special interest groups. Drugs can be a useful issue in symbolising the values of leaders – for example Gordon Brown in his first speech as Labour leader talked of punishing the evil of drug pushers who poison our children.

Compared to scientists and researchers, politicians see themselves as influenced by values and exercising common sense. They represent wider interests, especially the public interest, and are influenced by higher values. For Alistair Darling, for example, politics is about changing behaviour and changing culture for the wider good. Many of the New Labour leaders saw themselves as influenced by ethical values of social responsibility. These sets of values mean that politicians will judge any specific issue in terms of how it fits into their larger frames or narratives: ‘all decision makers are loaded with prejudice in advance’. . . Frank Dobson says he ‘saw all evidence through the lens of a belief that inequality is at the base of health issues.’

Ministers argue that to influence politicians you need to understand their psychology and pay attention importantly to presentation. There is a key need for brevity – a 2 page summary will get more attention than a long report which will not be read by decision makers. It is crucial to acknowledge the role of political advisors, who can be very useful, especially in helping to deal with civil servants who are seen as often able to stifle things. The civil service machine is seen by politicians as being against change.

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89 Tom McLellan: ‘Is addiction treatment effective?’ SSA conference 8 November 2001 Leeds who went on to discuss how ‘research shows methadone alone is insufficient - it is the conditions associated with methadone treatment that make the difference. Factors associated with relapse are low SES, poverty, low family support, psychiatric comorbidity, lack of adherence to treatment programme. Evidence of success in chronic conditions: retention in treatment and reductions in emergency care.’
90 Mark Easton of the BBC and the public spat with NTA.
91 Interview with service provider 25 February 2010
92 reported by Mark Easton at City Roads 30 years at Tate Modern May 7 2008 (Mark Easton - Home Affairs Editor of BBC)
93 Darling 2008
94 Dobson 2009
Researchers and scientists and those with evidence are more likely to influence a Minister if they can get a direct link to the Minister or politician rather than going through the civil servants. If the evidence is going to challenge prejudices then it is crucial to be diplomatic.

Good policy making needs both the *gin* and the *tonic* – a blend of political judgement and technical expertise: 95

‘if the hon. Gentleman was in my place and was the Minister with responsibility for the issue he would, in the end, with his colleagues in Government, be charged with the responsibility of making a decision. We get advice—all Governments get advice all the time—but in the end we have to make the decision.’ 96

For most politicians, drugs policy is not a high level issue and both parties tend to agree on the need to keep it marginal. One interviewee commented, most people in many countries, including politicians don’t care a toss about drug users. 97 For example, Bob Ainsworth was responsible for organising a debate on drugs policy in Westminster Hall on Thursday 16 December 2010: 98

‘I asked for a full day in the Chamber in prime time and the Committee gave me three hours in Westminster Hall on a one line Whip on a Thursday, the last sitting Thursday before Christmas—but I am grateful none the less.’

Some politicians with a special interest work hard to try to get more attention to the issue, to bring it in from the margins. *An individual MP* can generate debate, and try to keep the issue live in parliament, through adjournment debates or using the all party groups. He or she can be involved with reports, sit on select committees 99 or belong to other groups. For example, the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on drugs issued a report on prescription and over the counter drugs. This had massive publicity and managed to generate a story line on *Coronation Street* (a popular television soap), featured on the *One Show* and in magazines, colour supplements and the front pages of national newspapers. This was a time consuming process and involved a key role for a MP’s political assistant. They issued a press release asking for written evidence and had over a hundred pieces submitted. They ran the inquiry like a select committee and held oral sessions with a wide range of participants and received evidence. This reflected the fact that it was seen as an important issue. On this, the APPG worked directly with DrugScope, a drug information charity and lobbying group.

Once identified with an issue, a politician gets drawn into the topic: people make contact then they are influenced by meeting people with a range of views and experiences. But not all the people they meet

95 ‘We need both the gin and tonic. We need the blend of political judgement and technocratic expertise’ - Mr Barroso quoted in Charlemagne *Economist* April 14 2012 p42
96 Vernon Coaker HC Deb, 7 October 2008, c21WH
97 Interview with policy advocate 13 February 2009
98 column 341 WH
99 House of Lords committees are also of importance in conducting inquiries, collating evidence and producing reports.
are willing to speak out: ‘people - judges, teachers - come up to me and whisper in my ear “for God’s sake decriminalise cannabis.”’.  

In this process lobbyists play a key role and MPs are also influenced by membership of one or more of the special groups that have proliferated in parliament – with regard to drugs, important ones being the All Party Parliamentary Groups on Misuse of Drugs and a more recent one on Drug Policy Reform.

MPs like drug users seem influenced by their peer groups.

Politicians in both the Commons and the Lords see themselves as influenced by a number of sources of evidence. Expert committees and select committees provide valuable forums for a dialogue which can develop between key policy actors. Evidence they accumulate and their conclusions can be very influential. For example, the Science and Technology Committee produced numerous reports with recommendations which were adopted by government. Advisory councils are influential sources - in the science area alone there are 75. But of course there is also the omnipresent Daily Mail: ‘as soon as anyone talks about drugs it is an interesting subject for the media – you only have to say something true like David [Nutt] did about falling off horses and the media pick it up straight away’. Research evidence is important but is seen as dominated by the US – ‘there is a need for more British research including on culture and drug taking’.  

Facts are important but key details and some facts don’t get out to the general public. Some politicians think that the general public are on the whole quite ignorant of the harms that drugs (including controlled, OTC and prescribed drugs) may cause. Other influences on policy are international contacts and pressure from other countries and ideas and evidence mobilised by particular individuals with recognised expertise (like John Strang, David Nutt and Danny Kushlick) and others who make contact are recognised. These individuals may influence in different directions: for example with current Conservative policy, Kathy Gygnell has been a driver. Here too a ‘big social report’ was a key vehicle of influence. With IDS (Ian Duncan Smith) they produced ‘a wonderful analysis of drugs problems –the description is good but their analysis of what to do is all wrong - they want to put them all through rehab and adopt a policy of abstinence’.  

Independent politicians often agree with the criticisms made of MPs by others. Politicians are arrogant: ‘politicians do not know best on this issue.’ Politicians are self-interested: ‘we want popular policies that give us good headlines in the daily papers . . . all our self-satisfaction as politicians—our desire to get good headlines to get ourselves re-elected.’ Politicians have no concern for evidence: ‘the whole of drug-taking policy, in my 20 years in Parliament, has been an evidence-free zone that is rich in prejudice, ignorance and denial.’  

100 From interview December 3 2008  
101 From interview December 3 2008  
102 From interviews 2008-10  
103 Flynn 2000  
104 HC Deb, 3 April 2008, c946 Paul Flynn  
105 HC Deb, 3 April 2008, c946 Paul Flynn
On the other hand, some politicians do have concern for evidence: for example with regard to the production of the RSA report - Joan Ruddock MP - ‘she went onto that committee not knowing anything about drugs and came off thinking their recommendations were spot on – she was converted’. And before the last election, the Liberal Democrats policy was that ‘we would like to establish a standing Royal Commission so that these issues can be addressed in a scientific and, perhaps, independent way... [policy would] combine placing a greater emphasis on tackling drug use as a public health issue with taking a much more focused approach to the dealers and organised criminals who peddle these drugs, destroying lives and fuelling criminal activity’.  

David Willetts, currently Minister in charge of science policy, says he believes in an evidence-based approach and so does the Cabinet. But, he says, politics has more to it than just academic evidence: politicians have to refer to manifesto commitments which indicate a framework of beliefs. And often the public want government to act. Politicians appreciate the interplay between values and evidence. So politicians argue that ‘evidence matters’ but they have to link evidence to a narrative, an argument and vision. The role of the politician is to use intuition and exercise judgement.

While politicians do have regard for evidence, they need to beware the seduction of the firm number, especially because of ‘statistical illiteracy among politicians’. Ministers express surprise at how often the evidence is not there to answer the key questions they raise. So decision makers do use evidence and statistics in policy making – the question is in what way is it used? Politicians also comment that quite a lot of research seems to be irrelevant to them. Evidence that challenges preconceived opinion is important, some claim.

There is often a surprising disdain expressed by politicians for civil servants: politicians do not see them as a key source of evidence or judgement, believing themselves to be more in touch than civil servants and experts. For example, David Blunkett commenting on the Home Office: “it is one of the least efficient, least competent, least connected to the world outside organisations that I have ever seen. What we have achieved so far has been in spite rather than because of it.” And Chris Mullin when on the Home Affairs Select Committee noted on Tuesday 30 October 2001:

‘The opening session of our inquiry into drugs policy: the witnesses were various officials from the government’s anti-drugs apparatus including the “Tsar” Keith Hellawell who seemed depressed ... It was only when I inquired why their written evidence had not addressed decriminalisation – half of our terms of reference – that things livened up. The officials seemed to be in a state of denial. In the real world a huge debate is going on. Even senior police officers are arguing that the so-called war on drugs is lost and that the only way to defeat the criminals is to collapse the black market by ending prohibition. Round and round we went, but they seemed reluctant even to address the subject. It was clear they had given no thought whatever presumably on the assumption that this was territory on which politicians fear to tread. The

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106 Tom Brake debate 2008 HC Deb, 3 April 2008, c951
107 Speaking on BBC 1 Radio 4 June 4 2010 1.30 ‘More or less’.
108 Clarke 23 January 2008
109 Quoted in Mullin 2009: 244
poor woman from the Home Office was distraught. When I suggested she go away and provide us by Thursday with a paper rebutting the arguments for decriminalisation her forehead actually touched the table. ‘

Politicians as good democrats also accept they have to defer to public opinion even when they think it is wrong. There is a long history of attention to the question of public opinion on the drugs question. For example, Jim Callaghan asked for the views of his Cabinet on the political consequences of the various courses being then proposed by the Home Affairs Committee. He asked ‘Has the right balance been achieved in relation to public opinion on drug taking in general and on cannabis in particular? . . . the proposals approved by the Home Affairs Committee are thoroughly rational and can be presented as such but my colleagues will be aware of the strong feeling which exists particularly in relation to cannabis.’

Later in continuing discussion of the Misuse of Drugs Bill (c(70) 34)

‘the Committee [Home Affairs Committee] had recommended that ... the penalty for possession of cannabis might be curtailed from ten years to three years. Further reflection however had suggested that public opinion might well regard a change of this kind as indicating too lenient an attitude on the part of the government towards the potentially dangerous practice of drug taking. . . . the Cabinet would wish to consider whether the political damage which the government might suffer if this impression gained ground was sufficiently serious to justify a modification of the terms of the Bill before it was introduced.’

The minutes continue that the proposed reduction of penalty regarding cannabis from ten to three years for simple possession

‘would be liable to be severely criticised by public opinion, especially by parents and teachers ...[and refer to] the impact of this apparent concession to permissive tendencies in society .... The government might be at considerable political risk as a result . . . it would be very unwise to underestimate the degree of public concern on this subject and the ease with which government’s intentions might be misinterpreted . . . on the other hand, the proposals as approved by the Home Affairs Committee were the result of very careful consideration and reflected the considered judgement of expert opinion.’

Tensions in achieving the right balance between public opinion, respect for values and science in the development of policy are thus of long standing and continue into the present:

‘I think that most Members would admit that that is extremely difficult to achieve at the moment, because of the pressures that we face from outside. That sometimes makes it difficult for science to dictate the decisions that we make here.’

110 Mullin 2009 : 233-4
111 TNA/PRO. Memorandum C(70)34 CAB 129/148. 24 February 1970. From James Callaghan Sec of State for the Home Department
112 TNA/PRO_1915567/CAB/128/45. Conclusions of Cabinet Meeting 26 February 1970 (p10)
It is at constituency surgeries that MPs come face to face with their constituents and these meetings are an important source for their information on the current concerns of their electorate - in addition to focus group results and opinion polls. Over time, the social work role of MPs has increased, they report, as other social supports have diminished and problems of people in general have increased. This work is very time consuming and particularly so in poorer areas. Decline in party membership means that contact with party members is no longer typical or representative of voters.

Direct experience and contact with living people influence politicians more than cold facts. In discussing drugs problems and policies, MPs often cite projects in their own constituencies and are clearly influenced by such direct contact with projects at this level: ‘It was witnessing (as a lawyer) damaged lives, the living dead heroin addict with no more aspiration than living off a methadone script and whatever else he could top it up with, the lost opportunities of being good parents and the harm to their children, which motivated me to try and improve the situation locally and nationally.’

And MP Chris Mullin wrote on Monday 12 November 2001 in Manchester:

‘A city awash with drugs. Doomed youths begging in every other doorway, shootouts between dealers in Moss Side. The epidemic has also spawned a vast industry of publicly funded agencies full of well meaning people who are trying to cope with it. ... a morning visiting drugs projects. Everywhere we asked people what they would do and most but by no means all replied that they would move towards decriminalising starting with heroin. One of the most vehement was a police superintendent, another a Methodist minister.’

22 March 2002 Sunderland

‘another parent with a daughter on heroin at the surgery this evening. The third in the last couple of months. Before that I’d never had any... he was a hard working decent man of about my age’.

3 April 2002

In the afternoon I called on the local drugs action team. They are swamped – five years ago they had 46 referrals for heroin addiction; last year there were 574. In addition they had another 843 for alcohol, amphetamines and prescribed drugs. Alcohol is still the biggest problem but heroin is gaining rapidly.'

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113 Tom Brake shadow spokesperson in debate 2008 HC Deb, 3 April 2008, c951
114 David Burrowes MP Addiction Today July-August 2011
115 Mullin 2009: 237
116 Mullin 2009: 238
117 Mullin 2009: 272
118 Mullin 2009: 274
‘All Members have constituents who come along to their surgeries and tell them about the devastating consequences of cannabis on the lives of young people.’ \(^{119}\)

Such facts do not lead to self evident conclusions however. The information is then interpreted by politicians through the frame of their value-sets and on the basis of other information they have acquired in their lives. Here it matters whether an MP has always lived as a professional politician or he or she has a background and experience in other walks of life – or at least other interests - what Denis Healey called hinterland.

For example, one time junior Minister with responsibility for drugs, Vernon Coaker:

‘in a previous existence I taught...one of the worst experiences that I remember was of a young girl who was having problems with substance misuse. I had been teaching long enough to remember that I had tried to help her mother, who had also had problems with substance misuse when I was teaching...education in schools, and I provided it when I taught personal and social education, which was a new subject then.’\(^{120}\)

Or Brian Iddon, former Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Drugs, was a chemist and local councillor before becoming an MP. On election to Parliament in 1997 he hoped to be able to increase public understanding of science. He also had a special interest in housing and neighbourhood disputes. During his time at Westminster he asked many questions in Parliament, for example regarding Portugal’s policy, hepatitis C, the ACMD, whether the MDA was fit for purpose, naloxone and on OxyContin deaths.

Not only values and direct experience influence MPs – the role of other interests cannot be overlooked:

‘as ever The Man [Tony Blair Prime Minister] was sitting surrounded by whisky bottles when we filed into his room. As fast as he was signing, staff were taking them away...Helen said one was auctioned for £200 in Sheffield last week so all this signing obviously spreads happiness.’\(^{121}\)

And as ever the politics-newspapers interactions play a huge role:

Wednesday 22 May 2002

‘Our much leaked long awaited drugs report is published this morning and has attracted widespread attention. The BBC and several newspapers are leading with it. I was up bright and early and gave about twenty interviews starting with Today. The reviews are generally favourable - “The MPs have done the nation a service as the first substantial group of elected politicians to join an adult debate” says the Standard. Not everyone was up for an adult debate. “Soft MPs want junkies to get safe houses” screams the ludicrous Daily Record... Unfortunately Blunkett has muddied the waters by issuing a statement refusing to contemplate recategorising

\(^{119}\) David Amess (Southend West, Conservative) HC Deb, 3 April 2008, c955
\(^{120}\) HC Deb, 7 October 2008, c18WH
\(^{121}\) Mullin 2009:245
Ecstasy and saying there are no plans for safe injecting houses. Silly man, having called for an “adult debate on drugs” he promptly closes it down.’ 122

11 July 2002

“"BLUNKETT GAMBLES WITH OUR CHILDREN” screams the front page of this morning’s Sun on the decision to downgrade cannabis and there is more of the same in several other papers. So much for the mature debate he was hoping for. Is it possible to have a mature discussion about any difficult issue in this country?’ 123

The media are able to influence politicians partly because there is not agreement on drugs policy. Politicians note that opinion is divided across and within parties on these issues. Ideally the only way to approach difficult questions is to work together rationally and sensibly - if they do have to deal with the issue. Quite often the issue can be conveniently parked - put into the long grass - with change being necessary only when pressure becomes overwhelming - from outside or internally or from a clear need to act evidenced through a crisis or international pressure.

**Politics, evidence and the drugs question**

What emerges from the above is that some social issues, like drugs, at some points in time become constructed as ‘social problems’ for which a policy solution is sought. How that solution is constructed will reflect the way in which the problem is defined - this in turn depends on the political framework in which it is placed. In this process of framing, history and culture play key roles – policy legacies can be explained by reference to political cultures. Cognitive bias, the shaping of attitudes, perceptions and decisions by reference to pre-existing sets of ideas is not a new concept. Tim Bale quotes Tolstoy 124

‘Most men – not only those considered clever, but even those who are very clever – can seldom discern even the simplest and most obvious truth if it be such as obliges them to admit the falsity of conclusions they have formed, perhaps with much difficulty – conclusions of which they are proud, which they have taught to others, and on which they have built their lives.’

Because of this most politicians avoid the drugs lobby: as with other contentious issues 125, they try to insulate themselves from those ‘who wanted to change things or who simply wanted them to consider additional evidence.’ 126

As policy mechanisms are path dependent so too are values. 127 Moral panics 128 set the initial frame for discourse – leading to the production of stereotypes and appliance of stigma - and these together with media amplification raise public alarm.

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122 Mullin 2009:289
123 Mullin 2009 : 300
124 Bale 2010: 368 quote from Tolstoy 1960 trans: 131
125 Tilly and Tarrow 2007
126 Bale 2010: 367
The role of stereotyping in drugs discourse has long been recognised. The central feature is a perception that certain values need to be protected. In this, politicians play a key role for they see themselves as directed principally by values rather than evidence. If the discourse is framed on values then simple cold facts will not be enough on their own to influence policy.

Thus to understand the divisions inherent in the drugs debate, we have to understand how the issue fits into wider frameworks of values. The contest between values has been presented in a variety of ways – with different elements stressed variously by different voices – such as personal freedom, proportionality or respect for the law.

Contemporary Britain has been structured on two ideas – the economic liberalism of Thatcherism and a social liberalism characterised by reforms on capital punishment, homosexuality and abortion. A key question raised by commentators such as David Lammy MP is ‘is it possible to have laissez faire (Anglo-Saxon) liberalism without social breakdown?’ While all parties, in spite of the financial crisis which began in 2008 and is still with us, remain attached to free-market capitalism, both Labour and Conservative parties have been concerned about social exclusion and social fragmentation. Tony Blair and New Labour preached a kind of ethical capitalism (social-ism), (Tony Blair was caricatured in Private Eye as a Vicar) and stressed the importance of family and community (Etzioni’s ideas of communitarianism were initially attractive). But New Labour dismally failed to live up to these early statements of values and, as time went on, the government was charged with the sin of hypocrisy. As revelations about the way decisions were made and about politicians’ behaviour (from Iraq to the expenses scandal) appeared, the public became cynical about all politics. Now David Cameron stresses, with a nod to Ian Duncan Smith and his Centre for Social Justice, a return to 1950s values which are thought to appeal to lower middle class, key voters: the values of hard work, paying taxes, and living as a family – meaning usually one man and one wife (at a time - although at times there has been acceptance of gay marriage).

In this context it is damaging for an MP to be too closely associated with the ‘drugs’ issue:

It ruined my parliamentary career of course – I was saying things the government did not want me to say – but I was too old anyway – I am viewed as an independent person in parliament - and by government as not a safe pair of hands in certain policy areas - and this is one of them.

To get involved in drugs policy is not a vote winner - I have upset some of my constituents who write to me angrily and ask why am I campaigning for the decriminalisation of cannabis.

127 Path dependency refers to the process by which earlier decisions determine or limit what happens later.
128 A moral panic occurs when ‘a condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylised and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges - or deteriorates and becomes more visible … sometimes the panic passes over and is forgotten.’ Cohen 1973: 9
129 Crick quotes Jonathan Swift: ‘hypocrisy is the tribute that vice pays to virtue’ (p155)
130 From interview December 3 2008
This affects MPs in marginal seats more than those in safe seats: ‘I am privileged – I can be frank and afford to lose votes because my majority was over 21,000 in 1997’.  

Rhetoric and reality

‘The conversion of difficulties into problems is said to be the *sine qua non* of political rebellion, legal disputes, interest-group mobilization, and of moving policy problems onto the public agenda’\(^1\)\(^3\).

‘Problem definition is a process of image making, where the images have to do fundamentally with attributing cause, blame, and responsibility. Conditions, difficulties, or issues thus do not have inherent properties that make them more or less likely to be seen as problems or to be expanded. Rather, political actors *deliberately portray* them in ways calculated to gain support for their side... political actors use narrative story lines and symbolic devices to manipulate so-called issue characteristics, all the while making it seem as though they are simply describing facts’. \(^2\)

Deborah Stone has also shown how narratives may change while policy remains the same. UK drugs policy demonstrates the same process: in spite of sometimes lurid discourse, policies in practice can seem to stay much the same. Because of this, some policy actors ignore the public and political debate and prefer to work quietly within the institutional framework to pursue the goals they prioritise.\(^3\) Experts in particular rarely try to influence at the political level but concentrate on working on specific topics below the radar, working within specialised networks.

The existence of (vertical) policy siloes is frequently commented on. But the division between the political ruling class and the service class (the middle level, implementing groups) is horizontal. And there are further divisions between the metropolis and the rest of the country, and between the service class and the working people and the poor – but the main division is between political elites and the rest. The political elite in Britain is increasingly distinct and separate. And the political elite has little

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\(^{131}\) From interview December 3 2008
\(^{132}\) Stone 1989:281
\(^{133}\) Stone 1989: 282
\(^{134}\) This observation refers to a rather different question than the one this paper is addressing but it is an important feature of the contemporary British scene regarding drugs policy. There seem to exist at least two parallel universes – one at the high level of politics is characterised by a lack of interest and lack of understanding of the drugs question; the other the middle level of mainly policy implementation involves expert researchers, professionals and practitioners and some civil servants and policy advocates. This separation indicates a worrying detachment of the political class from those arenas where precepts of evidence-based policy and practice are pre-eminent. So what we have is a middle stream of knowledgeable citizens who are distanced from the political class (which includes the media). This observation challenges the idea that evidence and research findings influence policy through a process of infiltration and permeation – the boundaries between these two layers seem no longer to be quite so porous.
shared experience with the rest of the country being characterised typically as drawn from Oxbridge universities with PPE degrees going straight from university into a think tank then becoming a special advisor and then parachuted in to a safe constituency. From there they enjoy a rapid rise into high office without their feet touching the ground – a form of sponsored not competitive mobility.

The fault lies with the political system

Contemporary British politics is adversarial where competing parties operate in an electoral market place, competing for votes and selling themselves as brands. ‘Drugs’ as an issue is thus linked into wider political strategies, positioning, messages and images. And in this, as has been shown, the politics-media axis is crucial. The Levison Inquiry has revealed how corrupt are the relations between police, press and politicians and how money and power influence politicians and parties. What were the normal ethics of public life have been debased\textsuperscript{135}: the old codes of proper behaviour in which civil servants were well versed have been undermined. \textsuperscript{136}

The importance of image is seen in the way the Conservatives, from Thatcher and Michael Howard (with various others in between) came to be viewed as ‘nasty, selfish, old fashioned and incompetent.’\textsuperscript{137} In seeking to win at a General Election, David Cameron on becoming leader aimed to decontaminate the brand and set up policy groups to explore new policies, including one led by Ian Duncan Smith on social justice. However, this was seen as a move too far towards New Labour policies and invoked the criticism that he was encouraging everyone to ‘hug a hoodie’: he had to back off with regard to issues of law and order and social breakdown in response to pressure from the Daily Telegraph and News of the World - ‘at last David Cameron sounds like a Tory’ the Daily Mail rejoiced. \textsuperscript{138} Bale notes crucially that high level politics operates in very small world and the partisan press plays a very big role in that very small world, giving disproportionate influence to leader writers, columnists and reporters who are ideologically driven.

Following another signal event – the death of a young boy, Rhys Jones, shot in Liverpool - David Cameron made three speeches on crime in one week including that he would ‘fight back against the drugs, the danger and the disorder.’\textsuperscript{139}

This process is described by Tim Bale as one of ‘ideological calibration’: with such fine-tuning being required in the political market, ‘drugs’ is just too explosive an issue to risk in the delicate balancing act.

\textsuperscript{135}‘Anonymous briefing has been a plague of modern politics’ commented Bob Ainsworth referring to briefings to the press from highest level in parties whether in government or in opposition.

\textsuperscript{136} Critics will say surely it was ever thus but the evidence appears to show increased corruption of political life over the past thirty years as the powers of the media and commerce have grown with the diminishing of the countervailing power of the public interest.

\textsuperscript{137} Bale 2010: 285

\textsuperscript{138} Bale 2010: 308

\textsuperscript{139} Bale 2010: 347
The Conservative Party’s Social Justice Report *Breakthrough Britain* emphasised tackling welfare dependency and *addiction* and gave support to marriage as the foundation of a more healthy society.\(^{140}\) How the drugs problem is framed is thus crucial in determining the shape of drugs policy.\(^{141}\)

As well as policy groups, *special advisors* play an increasingly important role in defining the details of policy.\(^{142}\) Special advisors are said to be like dogs – loyal and servile to their Cabinet Minister masters. A good, clever and decisive special advisor can enhance the work of a department and be the smooth oil in the machine. They are meant to understand the boundary between policy and politics. Above all the adviser must stay invisible - they are not elected or appointed in an open process but wield immense power.\(^{143}\)

In the contemporary political system, a key role is played by *think tanks*. Their approach to evidence differs from that of academic science. Think tanks think up the big messages and themes.\(^{144}\) A new government creates a new opportunity to influence policy: ‘the best moment to influence Ministers is when they are first in office before they have been captured by their departments.’\(^{145}\)

**Conclusion**

In general, members of the political class and their entourage – aspiring politicians, ex politicians, advisors to politicians, and those who comment on politics (academics and journalists) – all see drugs (and alcohol) as low level issues. Generally they either look blank or turn up their noses if drugs are mentioned to them – or they giggle and see it as a joke. As a research area it is seen as of low status (one civil servant puzzled ‘why is this?’). Similarly drugs is a low status issue within academic disciplines, only enhanced if it is linked to major foreign policy questions such as war or terrorism or domestically if to crime and violence. There is some interest if the topic can be linked to scandal – if it could be used as ammunition to bring an opponent down (eg ‘Cameron smoked cannabis at school’ – ‘did Osborne snort cocaine?’).

\(^{140}\) Bale 2010: 340

\(^{141}\) The *Runciman Report* tried to link use of cannabis to personal freedom and a concept of proportionality - as do many current ‘evidence- based scientists’.

\(^{142}\) These positions are also as route to high office as followed by David Cameron, Ed Miliband, Ed Balls, George Osborne and Nick Clegg. This has been described as the triumph of the SPADs - a new professional political system has arrived – spadocracy.

\(^{143}\) Problems arise when their activities become visible as did those of the aptly named Adam Smith, advisor to Jeremy Hunt exposed through the Leveson Inquiry.

\(^{144}\) The Conservative’s ‘big society’ theme originated with Phillip Blond, founder of the *Res Republica* think tank. Other think tanks with links to the Coalition Government include *Policy Exchange* founded in 2002 by a group including Michael Gove and *Reform* founded by amongst others Nick Herbert now Policing Minister. Ian Duncan Smith’s *Centre for Social Justice* is well known for its influence on welfare reform. Another influence on contemporary social policy is the *Nudge Unit,* set up in the Cabinet Office with a mission to explore how to use behavioural economics and market signals to persuade citizens to behave well. It is run by David Halpern, a former advisor to Tony Blair’s Strategy Unit, indicating the somewhat independent life of these advisors as he segued seamlessly from New Labour to the (New?) Conservatives.

\(^{145}\) *Economist* July 31 2010 ‘Send for the wonks’.
Why is this? Partly this must be because regular drug use is actually a minority habit, if we consider the statistics regarding ‘hard’ drug use especially. Only a minority use drugs regularly and the behaviour is associated with youthful transitions, it is thought to be something ‘ordinary people’ grow out of and only ‘losers’ continue to use. So ‘drugs’ are associated with things which are uncivilised, distasteful, arouse fear, are unknown and uncontrollable - linking to wider discourses about vice and virtue.\textsuperscript{146}

Neil Ascherson has shown the fundamental place of ideas of virtue and vice in European culture. Europe has always been precious about its borders and concerned about inward migration. Strangers came from the East, they were the \textit{Other}. Drugs were associated with threats to borders and with alien groups initially (Chinese, Caribbean). Drug use was associated with vice and vices were associated with the other, seen as a threat and as a security issue. Vices classically were identified as cowardice, uncontrollable passion, excessive luxury and deceit – the inverse of the Greek virtues of courage, moderation, austerity and candour: ‘from that opposition emerged the long discourse of civilisation and barbarism.’\textsuperscript{147} All debate about drugs fits within this discourse on civilisation. Drug use is thus seen by many as a vice associated with barbaric behaviour, dirt, disgust, danger and depravation. This explains the passionate and value driven nature of debate on drugs: it is at core a debate about culture and our sense of right and wrong. As such it is unlikely to be dealt with simply as a matter of purely technocratic evidence-based, scientific discourse. (Of course what counts as indecency and immorality is historically and culturally determined).

Drugs in political debate has not been just, as some have described it, used as a political football but more importantly perhaps it is used as a flag, to signal simple messages to a distant audience\textsuperscript{148}

Underlying this is a battle about values within British society\textsuperscript{149}. The values of the respectable, working-class remain even though the working class itself has fractured: the children of the organised working class are now to be found either in the so-called lower middle class, where they are still ‘hard working people’ - though more likely to be public sector workers, self employed or part time casual workers – or they are in the growing ‘shameless underclass’. The values which are denigrated as ‘working class authoritarianism’ or ‘populism’ are the values of the erstwhile respectable working class, the backbone of the trade unions, the old Labour Party and the welfare state\textsuperscript{150}. Politicians in both the Labour Party and in the Conservative Party are well aware of the existence of this class of voters. Their values are articulated by the \textit{Daily Mail}, although the problem is (as Nick Davies has shown) this newspaper

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\textsuperscript{146} This image was exacerbated by focusing attention on the PDU in recent years. ‘Legal highs’ also represent ‘an unknown danger to our children’.

\textsuperscript{147} Ascherson 2012: 18

\textsuperscript{148} Note the frequent and tedious references made in debate to ‘sending the right message’.

\textsuperscript{149} Haidt comparing conservatives with liberals argues that our morality is hard wired into brains from birth – gut feelings drive strategic reasoning. Influences are compassion, the desire to fight oppression and fairness – among liberals. Among conservatives these are also present but additionally influences are loyalty, authority and sanctity. The strength of these values is a challenge to rationalist delusions. Haidt 2012.

\textsuperscript{150} For example, in the Labour Party ‘a deeply entrenched strain of working class authoritarianism was frequently in conflict with the vein of progressive liberalism manifested in much of its middle and upper class membership’. (Morris 2001:379).
distorts them by a process of selection and lies. The point is however that these groups do not subscribe to social liberalism. ¹⁵¹

A frequent comment on the New Labour administrations has been to see them as pandering to a so-called ‘working class authoritarianism’, also labelled ‘populist punitiveness’, referring to the stress on toughness. This was linked to the desire to appeal to the ‘tabloid voter’ with an increasingly punitive approach to the disorderly. The importance of these values was well understood by Jack Straw. Today however there are few working class politicians in Parliament so MPs and their special advisors and think tanks have to rely on tabloids to tell them what voters think: ‘if nothing else the Leveson inquiry should prompt politicians to question why they became so dependent on tabloid editors to explain what their own constituents think (and perhaps whether quite so many MPs should be broadsheet reading graduates)’. ¹⁵²

This class division in the Labour Party is not new. As Richard Crossman reported in his diary for Thursday February 26th 1970:

‘Then we had an extremely interesting item. Callaghan on drugs. . . . As we discussed this, it became absolutely clear that the issue was really whether we should kowtow to public opinion or not. It was fascinating to see that at this point we had for the first time a sociological vote, that is, today every member of the Cabinet who had been at university voted one way and everyone else voted the other. Michael Stewart happened to go out but I checked with him on the front bench later and there was no doubt he would have voted with the university people for maintaining a discrimination, reducing the penalty for possession and increasing it on trafficking. Gerald Gardiner, Barbara, Denis, Tony Crosland, Roy, Dick Crossman, Wedgwood Benn, Peter Shore, Schackleton, Diamond and Harold Lever, we were all progressives. The antis, all saying public opinion was too strong for us were Willie Ross, Ted Short, Roy Mason, Jim Callaghan, Fred Peart, George Thomson, Cledwyn Hughes and George Thomas and also Harold Wilson who was on the side of Peart and Callaghan. But they were outvoted and Harold gave the clear majority to us. Having lost this battle however Callaghan whipped in with another suggestion and we did in fact give him the major concession that we would make the maximum penalty for cannabis offences not the three years originally proposed but five. The discussion was absolutely fascinating because no one really doubted the rightness of the tripartite classification of drugs, the reduction of penalties for possession and the creation of a new crime of trafficking. Nobody denied this, they simply said that the public wouldn’t understand it and that we couldn’t afford to alienate people on this issue’ ¹⁵³

Good politics and policy should be a blend of politics and technocratic advice. Politics is about making choices in a context of scarce resources and rests on choices about the kind of society we want.

¹⁵¹ They probably also do not subscribe to economic liberalism although they are not given the option of an alternative at present.
¹⁵² Gaby Hinsliff The dog and the lamppost Guardian 23.4.2012
¹⁵³ Crossman 1977: 836-7
Politicians claim that their role is to bring an overview, direction and drive, to join up the separate parts of policy, overcoming expert silos. The value of politicians is that they are generalists. 154

The critical question is ‘who benefits from the current arrangements’? Whose interests are served by the current political system and current drugs policies? To explain this we would need to focus on underlying structural issues not just on what happens on the surface of politics, looking at overt actions and statements as has been done in this paper. We would need to look at what issues are not on the agenda, explaining this by reference to structural features: this would require a different methodology for the analysis of power relations. The problem is how to study what is not visible? This would require a different paper but briefly one might argue that potential beneficiaries of current drugs policies include: white people who lock up black people 155; middle class people who lock up poor people 156; criminals – (‘great power is accorded to criminals by drug policy’ say LEAP); organised crime and the Mafia 157; the alcohol, nicotine and other foods industries 158; the prescribed medicines industry; vested interests - self serving bureaucrats in the existing architecture of drugs policy 159 160; the United States internationally by the use of drugs in foreign policy as a justification for intervention 161; all those who profit from guns and wars; the prison workforce; and so on and so forth. The conclusion of such analyses is that drugs policy is not irrational insane policy: it is actually very rational, serving the interests of these well funded and powerful groups.

However we are where we are and democratic politics appears to be the best available option compared to the alternatives. Crick defends politics as a way of ruling in divided societies without resort to undue violence: if its actual methods are often rough and imperfect this is preferable to autocratic or totalitarian rule. 162 As such ‘politics is then civilising.’ 163 He sees progress as emerging from the dialogue between conservative, liberal and socialist ideas. What is needed therefore to improve the debate on drugs policy is to improve our political system, ridding it of the vested interests and corrupt influences which have been revealed through Leveson. Part of this improvement would be to challenge the false division between politicians exercising political judgement and experts concerning themselves merely with technical evidence. A better politics would recognise that experts and scientists have a right to contribute to political judgements and politicians should pay better attention to evidence. But it would also give much more respect to the values and experiences of the citizens as a whole, and find ways for them to participate in the process of policy formation.

154 comment in discussion at Institute for Government seminar 13 March 2012
155 Alexander 2010
156 Wacquant 2004
157 Glenny 2008
158 Courtwright 2005
159 Klein 2008
160 It was a commonly stated view in interviews that in UK drugs has become an industry – has moved from being a small pressure group to an ‘industry’, 161 McCoy 2003
162 Crick 1962
163 Crick 1962/92: 140
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