

Drugs Policy: Gone to Pot?

Mark Leech, *Chief Executive of UNLOCK.*

Recent Home Office research reveals that well over half of all recorded crime is drugs related, and that a small number of people on drugs can be responsible for a massive amount of crime — 664 addicts surveyed over a three month period were responsible for over 70,000 offences. What should we do about drugs and how can we reduce crime as a result? Mark Leech, the Chief Executive of the national ex offenders charity UNLOCK, argues for a balanced approach.

Occasionally, we get to experience a special moment in our life when we finally discover the person with whom we feel destined to share the rest of our days; 6 June 1992 was one of those rare moments in my life. Thomas was 21, lean, fit, good-looking, with a glowing smile and a wicked Glaswegian sense of humour to match: he was everything I had ever wanted in a partner. Caring, loving, romantic, a fountain of common sense and a model of loyalty — seven years later I was to walk out on the same man who as a result of drug misuse had transformed into an evil, thieving, devious and violent man who I simply did not recognise, which left me devastated.

Six months before I left him I had walked into our home one day and found a syringe on the kitchen worktop. Call it naive but my first thought was 'oh how nice, he's filled up my printer cartridge'. Only then did I notice the piece of cord wrapped around the syringe and my jaw dropped as the awful truth dawned; I was looking at a heroin 'works'.

Immediately when I confronted him Thomas admitted it, asking for help and support that I was only too pleased and eager to provide. I spent five nights watching over him in bed as he struggled to wean himself off the drug and escape the demons which wracked his body and tormented his mind.

We waited a week to see a drugs worker, a further fortnight to see a doctor and were then told the best route was to 'go private' — I was astonished to learn from his drugs worker one day that Manchester has an addicted heroin population of almost 10,000, yet there are just FOUR heroin detoxification beds available for the whole of the City.

In my work with unlock I had seen harsher drugs policies brought in by the government, including a mandatory minimum seven year sentence for a second drugs-related offence. What is the point of putting in place harsher legislation to deal with drug-crime after the commission of offences, if you do not couple it with

the provision of resources to help those who want to help themselves before they actually commit the offence?

We spent well over £3,000 on doctors, psychologists and drug-workers fees but each time he came close to conquering the habit he would slip back. His craving for heroin relegated me into runner-up in the relationship stakes. Heroin became his partner not me. I was seen as little more than a source of funding his heroin habit which he obtained by means that ranged from the downright devious to the actually quite comical in retrospect — like the day he took £200 worth of shopping back to ASDA a few hours after we had done the monthly 'shop', convinced them that he had bought the whole lot in error because unknown to him I had apparently already done the shopping, he persuaded them to return the £200: I can smile about it now, but at the time I felt so frustrated at not being able to make progress with him, and completely impotent at preventing the loss of the guy who was the centre of my universe.

I walked out on Thomas six months after I discovered his heroin addiction, in that short time my life had been turned on its head. I was tired of trying to help, drained of resources, sick to death of the violent tantrums he threw whenever he could not get his own way, and saddened to the core that seven years of a relationship had been so casually thrown away: how on earth could it have happened?

It actually happened quite easily, and what's more right under my nose. Thomas had gone over one night to a local friend's house where alcohol flowed freely in celebration of a small lottery win. Other people turned up and drugs appeared along with a piece of kitchen foil. The injection of the heroin was to come weeks later, smoking the drug through a straw was how it all began that night. In a short while he was gripped in the vice that was destined to wrench us apart.

The day after I walked out on Thomas in July 1999 I travelled to London for one of the regular meetings that I have with the Home Secretary and, ironically, drugs policy was at the top of the agenda as I walked into Jack Straw's office that day at the Commons.

Labour, like the Conservatives, have never had a rational drugs policy. They delude themselves into the belief that making drugs illegal will, as if by magic, solve the problem it represents. It will not, it never has done and it never will until we accept that not all drugs

are the same and treat them accordingly.

The real issue that needs to be used to distinguish hard and soft drugs is the issue of addiction. It is the power of the drug to get people physically addicted, and the speed and zeal with which that addiction happens, which should be the defining point in our drugs policies. It is addiction to the drug which leads to crime in order to finance the addiction, and it is the addiction that causes such a chaotic lifestyle as to make holding down a job or maintaining a relationship an impossibility.

No-one is arguing for the legalisation of heroin — certainly not me — but I do believe that we need to look seriously at the whole issue of drugs, accept that we have a problem with our current all-embracing prohibitive approach and accept that the solution lies in striking out in a different and perhaps more radical direction. We need to look around too at how other countries are dealing with the problems of drugs. Holland, for example, has relaxed the prohibition on cannabis and has thereby created an atmosphere in which there has been a toughening of the public acceptance of hard drugs. Whereas we in the UK have again fudged that issue with the Government recently announcing that cannabis is being downgraded to a Class C drug under the Misuse of Drugs Act — which means little other than the production, distribution and pricing of it remain firmly in the hands of the 'black market'.

Not all drugs cause the harm that heroin, cocaine or other opiates create — millions get stoned on cannabis every week without apparent damage, and a brief trip around the night clubs on a Saturday night will show you how many people (who during the week are law-abiding citizens) are happily loved-up and dancing the night away assisted by an ecstasy 'disco biscuit' and criminalized for doing so.

I am not saying that ecstasy cannot be harmful. I will never forget the gruesome pictures flashed around the world of 17 year old Leah Betts on a life support machine before she died after 'popping a pill', but I do say that we have to put that tragedy into context — if for no other reason than the fact that, despite Leah's death, millions of people around the country are still popping a pill every weekend and risking the same fate. Putting our head in the sand and insisting ecstasy is illegal and not open to debate will not change that.

The death of Leah Betts was not caused by 'ecstasy', but by what the tablet she believed to be ecstasy actually contained. And therein lies the problem with illegal drugs: where there is a high demand for a drug which the Government insists is illegal but which the public wish to consume, there is no mechanism for checking its content, and nor as a result any margin for error.

We have to face up to reality. Social drugs like ecstasy that do not cause addiction and are used in a recreational sense without risk to others, are here to stay. It is no good arguing about it, there is no point in

denying it, we have turned a corner in our lifestyle over the last ten years and we have to turn a corner in our policies to keep abreast of it — if the theory is ever to match the practice.

What we need is a thorough review of our drugs policies, accept that it is going to mean that we will have to reverse our approach to certain drugs that are currently illegal, and harden our approach to others the use of which we have to seriously deter. Which drugs fall on which side of the line is for others to judge, but draw that line we must, and sooner rather than later.

If we do not then people like Thomas will continue to fall into the same trap he did, spiralling out of control in a world of increasing unlawfulness. In that atmosphere, where we do not focus on individual drugs, resources are wasted with money spent on campaigning, investigating and prosecuting the users of some drugs which ought not to be seen as illegal and, as a consequence, there is less available to treat the misuse of the most harmful ones which rip our people and communities apart.