

HOUSE OF COMMONS
ORAL EVIDENCE
TAKEN BEFORE THE
HOME AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

DRUGS

TUESDAY 24 APRIL 2012

RUSSELL BRAND and CHIP SOMERS

MARY BRETT, KATHY GYNGELL and PETER HITCHENS

Evidence heard in Public

Questions 237 - 294

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Oral Evidence

Taken before the Home Affairs Committee

on Tuesday 24 April 2012

Members present:

Keith Vaz (Chair)
Nicola Blackwood
Michael Ellis
Lorraine Fullbrook
Dr Julian Huppert
Steve McCabe
Alun Michael
Bridget Phillipson
Mark Reckless
Mr David Winnick

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: **Russell Brand**, Comedian, Actor, Columnist, Singer, Author, Radio/Television Presenter, and **Chip Somers**, Chief Executive, Focus 12, gave evidence

Q237 Chair: Good morning, Mr Brand.

Russell Brand: Good morning.

Chair: Please have a seat. Mr Brand, Mr Somers, thank you for giving evidence to the Committee's inquiry into drugs. Mr Russell Brand, you gave written evidence to this Committee, which Members of the Committee have read. Could I start with a point about what you say in your evidence that you disagree with the legalisation of drugs because you think that a deterrent effect is necessary, is that right?

Russell Brand: I don't feel entirely qualified to talk about legislation. For me, what is more significant is the way that we socially regard the condition of addiction. It is something that I consider to be an illness and, therefore, more a health matter than a criminal or judicial matter. As I said, I don't think legalisation is something that I am particularly qualified to get into. In fact, I can see areas where decriminalisation might be considered useful and more efficient in countries, like Portugal or Switzerland, where there have been trials. It seems to have had some efficacy. But for me it is more important that we regard people suffering from addiction with compassion and that there is a pragmatic rather than symbolic approach to treating it. The legislative status of addiction, and the criminalisation of addicts, is kind of symbolic and not really functional. I don't see how it especially helps, but I am not saying, "Let's have a wacky free-for-all, let people go around taking drugs". It didn't help me much.

Q238 Chair: You are a former heroin addict.

Russell Brand: Yes.

Q239 Chair: Briefly, could you tell us how you got on to drugs and then how you managed to come off it, and how many years you were on hard drugs?

Russell Brand: I see you have incorporated the word "briefly" now into the question. As you already know, it is my propensity for verbosity. I became a drug addict, I think,

because of emotional difficulties, psychological difficulties and perhaps a spiritual malady. For me, taking drugs and excessive drinking were the result of a psychological, spiritual or mental condition, so they are symptomatic. I was sad, lonely, unhappy and detached, and drugs and alcohol for me seemed like a solution to that problem.

Once I dealt with the emotional, spiritual, mental impetus, I no longer felt the need to take drugs or use drugs. Actually, I got clean at Chip Somers' facility, Focus 12, which is abstinence-based recovery. That is what we essentially believe in: if you have the disease or the illness of addiction or alcoholism, the best way to tackle it is to not use drugs in any form, whether it is state-sponsored opiates, like methadone or illegal street drugs, or a legal substance like alcohol. We see no distinction between these substances. What we believe in is that abstinence-based recovery is the best solution, for people suffering from this condition, and that support structures exist to get people to maintain recovery—abstinence-based recovery. What we want is more research and funding into abstinence-based recovery and to be able to filter people towards this new lifestyle where, actually, criminalisation becomes less of an issue, in my view, because it takes people that have to indulge in criminal activity to fund their habits and gets them into being valuable members of society.

Was that brief enough?

Q240 Chair: Very brief, thank you. You were arrested, roughly, 12 times—

Russell Brand: It was rough, yes.

Chair: —by the police and the justice system. Do you think that when you were arrested that you had the kind of support that you needed, and people like you who were arrested, being involved in drugs, the rehabilitation and the support that was needed to get you off drugs? How did the criminal justice system react to you after your arrests?

Russell Brand: From my experience, speaking to people in the criminal justice system, and from my own personal experience being arrested, there is some confusion and ignorance around addiction. That is quite understandable because a lot of drug addicts—speaking personally—are anti-social. They are a strain on society. They necessarily engage in criminal activity. They are a public nuisance in many ways.

I felt when I was arrested that the police were doing a necessary job of enforcing the laws of this country, and that they were doing what they had to do. It wasn't until I had access to abstinence-based recovery that I was able to change my behaviour and significantly reduce—all but obliterate—my criminal activity, apart from the occasional skirmish.

Q241 Chair: The final question from me on this section is the issue of legal highs. We have been very concerned in the evidence that we have received about the number of legal highs that are available, and young people who seem to be able to take legal highs. Whenever they are banned or proposed to be banned a new legal high emerges. Do you think this is something that does affect young people? Is this now the drug of choice for young people?

Russell Brand: I don't know because I am not young enough anymore. I know that young people will always want to get high, and I think that what we need is a pragmatic approach to this. For me, in a way—as I said before, Keith—it is not significant the substance they are using, whether it is alcohol or illegal street drugs. The legal status of a drug is irrelevant to a drug addict. If you are a drug addict, you are getting drugs, that's it, you are going to get them. So in a way it is probably best to make it simple.

As for legal highs, what I think we need to do is address the social, mental and spiritual problems that are leading young people, or people of all ages, into taking drugs. So I think what we need is research into abstinence-based recovery and more awareness around it.

Chair: We will come on to some of those points with other questions.

Q242 Bridget Phillipson: You are currently working on a programme about addiction and how it is viewed in society. What messages are you hoping to get across in that programme?

Russell Brand: The messages that we are hoping to get across in this programme is that maintenance of drug addiction, through state-sponsored substances, like methadone, should only be deployed as part of a reduction, with the ultimate aim of abstinence-based recovery; that we need to start regarding addiction, in all its forms, as a health issue, as opposed to a judicial and criminal issue; that we need to change the laws in this country; that we need to have more compassionate, altruistic, loving attitudes to the people with the disease of addiction and recognise that these people, with the proper help and access to the proper treatment, can become active and helpful members of society, like myself—some would argue that point—or perhaps, more obviously, Chip Somers, a man with a criminal record as long as your arm, who now runs a treatment centre and has been clean for 27 years. That is the message: that we don't want to discard people; we don't want to life them off on methadone and leave them on the sidelines. We need to bring them into society, offer them treatment and, once again, neutralise the toxic, social threat that they offer as criminals, because they have to fund their habit, or even if it is a legal drug, like alcohol, they are clattering into things, driving drunk, pain in the arse people. We need to offer them treatment and activate them and incorporate them into our society. So the message is ultimately one of pragmatism, altruism and compassion in all areas of the condition.

Q243 Chair: Thank you. Mr Somers, we will have specific questions for you, but if you want to chip in—if I may put it like that—at any stage, please feel free to do so. Is there anything you want to add to what you have heard so far?

Chip Somers: I think he is doing splendidly.

Russell Brand: Thanks, Chip. Chip runs the treatment centre where I got clean so—

Chair: Yes, we are coming on to him in a minute, Mr Brand.

Russell Brand: He is already the puppeteer behind each and every articulation.

Chair: Thank you, Mr Brand.

Q244 Michael Ellis: Mr Brand, you have said that addiction is an illness.

Russell Brand: Yes.

Michael Ellis: Would you say that it is also fair to characterise it as self-induced, to a large extent, unlike many other illnesses?

Russell Brand: Not really.

Q245 Michael Ellis: Also, that it does carry with it victims. Many people who are on drugs commit offences against other people, do they not? So it differs in that respect as well, doesn't it? When one is looking at the criminal justice system, doesn't one also have to have some compassion and consideration for the victims of crime, where those crimes are committed by people under the influence of drugs?

Russell Brand: Michael, I am very glad you have asked me that question. It is a very important question and it is one that we need to address. Of course, the victims of acquisitive drug-related crimes are important and need to be taken care of. We were with Chief Superintendent Graham Bartlett of Sussex Police the other day, a wonderful man, a good civic minded gentleman. It is his belief that by regarding addiction as an illness, by offering treatment instead of a more punitive approach, we can prevent people from committing crimes.

Just personally, I was a criminal when I was drug addict, by virtue of my addiction, and the ways that I had to acquire money to get drugs. Anecdotally, Chip was an armed robber, in and out of nick all the time—I hope you don't mind me telling them this—and other people I have met, you know, criminality is a necessary component. Of course we are not saying forget the victims, but I am saying it is better to address the social situation pragmatically. I think we all know this. By prescribing methadone to people, most people on methadone are using illegal drugs to supplement their habit. They are not addressing the root problems. We need to approach the victims with respect. Where there has been criminal behaviour it needs to be dealt with correctly, but perhaps within the penal system itself we can offer treatment to addicts, like the brilliant work that is done by RAPt in various institutions and prisons.

Q246 Michael Ellis: You would say there needs to be carrot and stick, would you?

Russell Brand: I don't think there needs to be a carrot or a stick. Both of those things are like bizarre metaphors. What there needs to be is love and compassion for everybody involved. If people are committing criminal behaviour then it needs to be dealt with legally, but you need to offer them treatment, not simply out of some airy fairy, "Let's hold hands and hug" liberalism, but because it deals with the problem and it prevents further crimes being committed. Addicts that get clean one day at a time, through abstinence-based recovery, generally speaking, stop committing crimes. That is better for victims. It is better for the addicts. It is better for society.

Q247 Michael Ellis: The role that celebrities play in society is not insignificant. I want to ask you whether—

Russell Brand: I would argue that it is insignificant, and that is why they play that role.

Michael Ellis: Perhaps it should be more than it is, but what I want to know from you, Mr Brand, is whether, having got out of the cycle of addiction, and I congratulate you for that—

Russell Brand: Thank you.

Michael Ellis: —you would like to position yourself as a role model in society for those who might look to you as an example?

Russell Brand: As the great Tupac Shakur said, "Role is something people play, model is something that people make. Both of those things are fake". What I want to offer people is truth and authenticity in the treatment of this illness, in our regard to the criminal components of it, in assisting victims and in the way we legislate and organise our society. As you know, I can't be responsible—you lot hold committees all the time about the reprehensible behaviour of our media—what the cipher of my image is used to represent in the media, I have no control over.

Q248 Michael Ellis: You do. Forgive me, you do because your behaviour is some aspect of what is portrayed about you, isn't it?

Russell Brand: Yes, of course, but how is this going to be written up? This could be written up as, "Michael Ellis is sprawled on a pin there by the wit of Brand" or they could say, "Recalcitrant former drug addict rambled on". If you read it in *The Telegraph* it is going to say one thing; if you read it in the *Socialist Worker* it is going to say another thing.

Michael Ellis: It probably will be a combination.

Russell Brand: Of course the objective behaviour has components, but I am saying that what I want to offer people is truth and authenticity. Celebrity, as we all know, is a vapid,

vacuous, toxic concept used to distract people from what is actually important, and in this case that is the treatment of people with the disease of addiction.

Chair: Yes, Mr Somers.

Chip Somers: As far as we were concerned, those people who are brave enough, who are both celebrities and recovering addicts, have a profound effect on the number of people who seek treatment because it gives out a very positive message that recovery is possible. When Russell Brand's book came out the number of referrals to our treatment centre was just hugely exaggerated because people suddenly discovered that treatment was possible, help was possible and people could get better, and it made a profound difference. I would hope that actually more people in the public eye—well, I suppose, being celebrities they are in the public eye—will come forward and have the bravery to do so, because it does encourage people.

Q249 Michael Ellis: So celebrities can be a very positive role model?

Chip Somers: Absolutely. Of course, then it can backfire as well when people make a big fuss about being in recovery and then relapse. That is unfortunate. But we are fortunate with Russell that he is maintaining a good recovery, and that continues to be a good role model.

Q250 Chair: Mr Brand, do you think more people need to know about things, like cocaine production and where cocaine comes from? The Committee went to Colombia to look at the effects that the harvesting of cocaine was having on the people of Colombia, who are extraordinarily poor and were forced to be involved in this kind of activity. Do you think if there were more focus on where it all came from, and how it affected communities, that would help to stop people getting involved?

Russell Brand: No, Keith. No more than the industrial consequences of oil production affect people using their cars. People don't care about industry. People care about getting the resource that they require. The illegality makes no difference, the consequences in the nation of origin make no difference. What we need is to address the emotional, mental and spiritual problems that lead to addiction. Of course, any illegal industry, or the cocaine manufacture in South American nations, or wherever, has a negative consequence for their nations but I don't think that that is something that individual drug addicts are going to be affected by, to be honest, because they are normally on drugs.

Q251 Lorraine Fullbrook: I would like to ask a question to Mr Somers. Focus 12 has three high profile patrons: Mr Brand, Davina McCall and Boy George. That is something that was probably unthinkable about 50 years ago. Do you think that has led to the de-stigmatisation of addiction, or do you think it has led to a wider acceptance of drug use in society generally?

Chip Somers: I don't think it has encouraged people to use drugs. I think there have been some people who have made a positive—

Russell Brand: This lady has to get by. Sorry, love.

Chip Somers: I was right in the middle of my answer then.

Russell Brand: Still a good speech. There were just some ladies going by.

Chair: I think the public is fine. Yes, Mr Somers.

Chip Somers: Do you know I have completely forgotten where I was.

Russell Brand: That is because he was flirting with them two.

Lorraine Fullbrook: It was about high profile patrons and de-stigmatisation or does it lead to a wider acceptance?

Chip Somers: Yes. There are certain celebrities who have made a positive message about drug use. It has not helped the situation at all. Most people who get better from drug addiction are a very positive influence. But obviously there are some celebrities who have probably contributed to people using drugs, because they make it look glamorous, they make it look interesting, and I don't suppose that helps. While they are using they will tend to do that, but if they stop using then they obviously become a very positive role model. I do think there are some celebrities who have made the matter worse. I don't think on a national scale it has made a huge difference. There are one or two people who are influenced by that, but I don't think it is a—

Russell Brand: No. Who cares about bloody celebrities?

Q252 Lorraine Fullbrook: As the Chief Executive of Focus, how do you pick your celebrities?

Chip Somers: The ones that get clean, I will grab them.

Chair: Thank you, very helpful.

Q253 Nicola Blackwood: Firstly, I would like to congratulate you on your work on abstinence-based work. I think that it is very effective and I share your suspicion about long-term methadone maintenance. But I was struck by your comments about the problems of highlighting drug use in communities. Do you think that we are doing enough, or do you think that there is a risk that our harm reduction-based approaches to drugs education are giving a false impression that there are some drugs that are safe if they are used correctly?

Chip Somers: We are not doing anything like enough to give an honest answer to the problems of drugs, and I think we are giving a rather clouded message about drug use. There is a lot more that we could be doing about honestly educating people about drugs. I don't think we address it or take it on board properly enough.

Yes, I feel that we should be doing much more. Especially at an education level, we should be giving honest education and I don't think there are many schools that are giving honest education to young people. We have been educating young people now for 15 years and it has not had a major influence on the number of drug users. We need to change how we are doing the education of young people, particularly.

Q254 Nicola Blackwood: How?

Chip Somers: By giving more honest information. It is no good just going into schools and saying, "Drugs are bad. Stop it". Because in each of those schools there will be people who are using cannabis, who are using ketamine, who are using ecstasy. Not all the schools but some of them will be. If you don't give people both the good and the bad of drug use they will not listen to you. There are lots of people in schools who are smoking cannabis and not dropping dead. You have to give both the positive and the negative side of it, and I don't think we are doing that. We are giving too much of the negative side of it and not giving honest information. People won't listen unless it is honest.

Q255 Dr Huppert: Mr Somers, you are an advocate for abstinence-based approaches.

Chip Somers: Very much so.

Dr Huppert: You presumably know there has been work by Professor Strang, published in *The Lancet*—

Chip Somers: Yes.

Dr Huppert: —which showed that there was good evidence for methadone maintenance and very high cost effectiveness, fairly good for heroin maintenance, and a lack

of evidence for abstinence. Do you think that abstinence is the answer for everybody or are you arguing that there are people for whom it is a very good option?

Chip Somers: I think it is an admirable aim for everybody. Not everybody can achieve it. Not everybody can give up smoking. I think there is a really good purpose for methadone usage at a certain stage. But just to park people on methadone for four to seven years and more, it is criminal, really, just to keep people locked into that addiction because methadone usage is a dependency, you are totally dependent. It has a role but I think it gets overused and we just tend to use it as a response to everything, and we don't do enough to intervene.

It would be an admirable aim for everybody. I don't think methadone usage is a good thing. I see very few people on methadone who are leading good, stable lives. Most of the people who are using methadone are also using other drugs on top. If I saw it producing good stability I would be much more in favour of it. I don't see that. What I do see is that people who are abstinent lead good, clean and decent lives, but obviously not everybody can achieve it.

Q256 Dr Huppert: I think that suggests further research is needed to check the results.

Chip Somers: Yes.

Q257 Dr Huppert: Can I also ask both of you. Obviously, we have finite resources to spend. If we are going to spend more money on treatment, and if we are going to spend more money on education, money has to be taken from somewhere. One possible suggestion is that we spend less money on doing the policing of possession, for example. Is that something that you would support or would you see things in a different way?

Russell Brand: I think that is a brilliant idea, as a matter of fact, and I think there are people within the criminal justice services that share that view. Yes, you have to appropriate these resources from somewhere, and—as has already been brought up in here, mate—penalising people for the possession of drugs is costly and expensive. A good number of the times I was arrested was simply for possession, and the administrative costs of that, yes, would be better spent on education and treatment. I think that would be a very, very sensible use of those redirected funds.

Chair: Mr Somers.

Chip Somers: I feel like I am at school now because I have forgotten the question.

Russell Brand: Like, do you think instead of nicking people for possession they should stick it into treatment and drugs education?

Chair: Thank you for that translation, Mr Brand. Mr Somers.

Chip Somers: There is an awful lot of money wasted on small time possession of small amounts of drugs, which are just part and parcel of the daily hustle and bustle of using. There is an awful lot of police time wasted on that. I am not saying that we should legalise it or anything, but I think if we could get rid of some of that because that sort of minor possession is part of the everyday life of being an addict. I certainly think there is a massive difference between decriminalising and legalising. It is good to treat it as a health issue, rather than a criminal issue but I am not in favour of legalising things. I think we do waste a lot of money, unfortunately, on minor possession.

Russell Brand: You spent quite a lot of time in prison on account of possession.

Chip Somers: I did. Yes, I did.

Russell Brand: But also armed robbery to get—

Chip Somers: Other drugs.

Q258 Nicola Blackwood: There is quite a gap between education and full blown addiction and treatment for abstinence. In that gap you have first use and so on, and what you need is intervention during that period to prevent addiction. Some of that prevention is perhaps first arrest for prevention and diversion programmes. Are you suggesting that we should be removing all spending on those intermediate steps in the drugs policy?

Chip Somers: No, I think we should do it better.

Q259 Lorraine Fullbrook: I would like to ask both gentlemen, what are your views on decriminalisation or legalisation of drugs?

Russell Brand: Chip has already been pretty clear on the subject. I am not a legal expert but I am saying that to a drug addict the legal status is irrelevant. It is at best an inconvenience. If you need to get drugs because you are a drug addict you are going to get drugs, regardless of their legal status, so the more money you waste in administering and controlling that, you know I think there is a futility to it.

Q260 Lorraine Fullbrook: So would you be in favour or not?

Russell Brand: To tell you the truth, yes, I would. I think there is a degree of cowardice and wilful ignorance around this condition. A good many people here—if you think about it—we all know someone who is affected by alcoholism or addiction, and it is something we increasingly need to handle compassionately and pragmatically. The criminal and legal status sends the wrong message. But, as I said before, I wouldn't start banging a drum to make drugs legal, because myself I don't take any drugs and I don't drink because for me they are bad. I just think we need to recognise the distinction that certain people have a condition, or a tendency, so that drugs and alcohol are going ruin their lives. We need to identify those people and offer them the correct treatment.

Q261 Lorraine Fullbrook: Mr Somers, do you agree with decriminalisation or legalisation?

Chip Somers: There is a real argument for decriminalising it so that it gets treated like a health issue rather than a legal issue. However, I think there is a massive difference between that and legalising drugs. You will find it very difficult to justify the legal use of a lot of drugs. You can't really justify the legal use of heroin, crack cocaine or any of those drugs. There is no medical or legal reason why people should be able to use those drugs, so I think you would be hard pressed to—

Q262 Chair: What about cannabis?

Chip Somers: Cannabis is probably the one you could make an argument for.

Q263 Chair: But you would not support the legalisation of cannabis?

Chip Somers: It is the one that you have a chance of actually putting forward an argument of justification for it. I don't think there is any justification for the legalisation—

Q264 Lorraine Fullbrook: If you legalise or decriminalise cannabis, you are not taking away the problem. We have seen the other end, where there is a serious organised crime issue and a narco-terrorism issue, which ruins people's lives; I mean murders people and causes conflict in countries, so we are looking at the other side of this.

Chip Somers: I am not advocating the legalisation of cannabis. I am just saying if there was any drug at all that you could put forward an argument for legalising, cannabis is the one you have the best chance with. But how on earth do you justify the usage of heroin or crack cocaine, or anything like that at all?

Russell Brand: Making it illegal is not working anyway, Chip. I just think that there needs to be honesty and authenticity around this issue so that people in Parliament don't look like they are out of touch. It is really good that you are holding this Committee, but some of this information is already accessible.

Chair: Thank you, final question from Mr Ellis.

Q265 Michael Ellis: You both referred to a preference for ignoring what you described as the more minor offending in relation to drugs. Can I suggest to you that a lot of the more minor offending leads to some of the more major offending, and that actually what one is doing, if one was to ignore those types of offences, would be to make the matter worse, both for society who is suffering under the increased levels of crime, but also for the offender who would be less likely to learn the lessons of having been arrested and be more likely to get worse.

Chair: Mr Somers.

Russell Brand: Can I just interrupt for a bit, because otherwise it is like they are telling us what to do. Being arrested isn't a lesson. It is just an administrative blip. You need to demonstrate an awareness of the situation. Yes, of course, in many ways the disease or the condition of addiction does exacerbate, and if you start taking drugs it is likely you will take worse drugs, and if you are taking expensive drugs you will end up committing crime. But again, mate, what we need to identify is a degree of authenticity and compassion in the way we deal with this problem, otherwise you just seem like you don't know what you are talking about.

Q266 Michael Ellis: What about the victims of the crime?

Russell Brand: We talked about them. You can tell what party they are in from their questions, can't you, "What about the victims of the crime?"

Michael Ellis: I think all parties are interested in victims of crime.

Russell Brand: Of course we are. That is what we are saying. We are not saying, "Let's ignore victims".

Q267 Chair: I think we are running out of time. I have a final question about—

Russell Brand: Time is infinite. We cannot run out of time.

Chair: It is. But for this Committee, I am afraid—

Russell Brand: Who is next? Theresa May? She may not show up. Check she knows what day it is.

Chair: Mr Brand, I have a final question for you.

Mr Winnick: It is not quite a variety show, Mr Brand.

Russell Brand: You are providing a little bit of variety, though. You are making it more like *Dad's Army*.

Chair: Mr Brand, you have 4.5 million Twitter followers—

Russell Brand: Oh yes.

Chair: —and 1.5 Facebook followers. Having gone through addiction and then rehabilitation, what is your message to young people who want to get involved in drugs? What would you say to them about the effects that it has?

Russell Brand: My message isn't for young people. My message is for people that have this condition of addiction. If you have the condition of addiction there is help available for you, and I recommend abstinence-based recovery. Some people can safely take drugs, I think they can. As long as it doesn't turn them into criminals, or harm their health, then I don't feel like it is any of my business. I am not here to do some "Just Say No" stuff. The kids that sang that "Just Say No" were all taking drugs in the White House when they were

visiting Nancy Reagan. It is a further demonstration of the disjunct between reality and authenticity. Let's have an authentic, truthful, honest debate and some funding for abstinence-based recovery.

Q268 Chair: Mr Somers, do you have anything to add to that with the excellent work you are doing in your charity?

Chip Somers: I get very muddled in all the kind of legalisation and decriminalisation. What I tend to do is deal with the problem when it exists. I agree completely that when those people come in for treatment they have damaged a lot of people in the public. They are harming at least four or five other people in their families, who are significantly distressed by that behaviour. I try and prevent that, and I think the best way of preventing that on a long-term basis is ultimately abstinence treatment. That is when you stop causing harm to families, stop causing harm to the public. That is your best chance, because at the moment I see people who are not in abstinence programmes still continuing to cause distress to families and the public.

Chair: Mr Somers, Mr Brand, thank you very much.

Russell Brand: Thanks for having us.

Chip Somers: Thank you.

Chair: We are most grateful, and thank you for your written evidence.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: **Mary Brett**, Member of Eurad, Member of Prisons and Addictions Forum at the Centre for Policy Studies, Trustee of CanSS, **Kathy Gyngell**, Researcher and Media Commentator, and **Peter Hitchens**, Journalist and Author, gave evidence.

Q269 Chair: Thank you very much for coming to give evidence. As you know, the Committee is conducting an inquiry into drugs policy and all aspects of drugs policy. Mr Hitchens, if I could start with you. You have been quite critical of successive Governments, including, to some extent, the terms of reference of our inquiry. Because I think you have a feeling that all this strategy does not result in Government and Parliament being tough on those who use drugs. Is that your view? Are you worried about the way in which drug strategy is developed?

Peter Hitchens: In my view, the simple summary is this. Most discussion on drug policy in Britain today is based on the following false logic: that there has been an attempt at serious prohibition of drug use, that attempt at serious prohibition has failed, therefore, we should abandon any future attempts at serious prohibition. The truth is—and it is easily examined if you look, for instance, at the arrest figures, if you look at Lord Hailsham's instructions to Magistrates, dating back to 1973—that this country abandoned any serious attempt to prohibit the use and possession, particularly of cannabis but also actually of class A drugs, many years ago. We have, informally and without admission, a system of decriminalisation in this country more advanced than in either Portugal or the Netherlands. To argue on the basis of that, that prohibition has failed and that, therefore, we should have even less of it, is not merely false and mistaken but actually unhinged.

Q270 Chair: That is very helpful. Mary Brett, the Government's overall strategy, do you think it is going in the right direction?

Mary Brett: The new strategy?

Chair: Indeed, the new strategy.

Mary Brett: The new strategy. I am in drug education, really. If they do what they say, and stop people from ever taking drugs in the first place, I will be absolutely delighted. They say that they will give accurate and reliable information, and that is not out there at the moment. But if that is altered, yes, I am happy with it. It makes a change from the harm reduction education, which has been in vogue for the last—I don't know—10 or 15 years, something like that.

Kathy Gyngell: I agree that the war on drugs is—you would like to say, reports of my death have been much exaggerated—something that has not happened. We have de facto decriminalisation. As Mr Brand said, being arrested is an administrative blip, if it indeed happens. If anything happens after arrest you are even luckier. I think since cannabis was reclassified to class B, in effect, all we have had in the majority of cases are warnings. Children haven't been protected. There hasn't been proper intervention, and unfortunately there are not the types of intervention programmes, following that initial arrest or warning, that do help children and stop them from continuing.

Q271 Chair: Mr Hitchens, you have been absolutely clear you are against decriminalisation. But you have probably followed events in South America where, following the visit of President Obama—indeed, before he visited Colombia recently—the Heads of Government of South American countries are all saying that we have to have a debate about decriminalisation, because the so-called war on drugs—and this is where they agree with you—has not really worked. Is there no possibility, do you think, of any form of decriminalisation to try and deal with the drugs barons who tend to run these cartels?

Peter Hitchens: Mr Chairman, we have decriminalisation. We have had decriminalisation in this country since the passage of the Misuse of Drugs Act in 1971, a bipartisan measure. Particularly since its implementation, after Lord Hailsham's speech to the Magistrates' Association, in October 1973, when he instructed Magistrates to cease sending people to prison for cannabis possession. That has then grown over the years into a reduction of penalties for that drug, to such an extent that the prime police response to a cannabis arrest now is something called the "cannabis warning", which does not even have your legislative seal on it. It was created entirely administratively by the Association of Chief Police Officers and has no legislative force, nor does it have any criminal force. Cannabis in this country is effectively decriminalised. One could point out further, if you want me to go into this—

Chair: Please.

Peter Hitchens: —from an answer obtained by Nicola Blackwood, some months ago, that the actual performance of the criminal justice system towards class A drugs is not much stronger, so we have a situation of decriminalisation. To argue that to solve any problem to do with drugs you would need to decriminalise is, therefore, to argue from a position of saying we need something that we already have, which we have had for 30 years. The huge tragedies visited, particularly on South and Central America, are the result of the enormous self-indulgence of drug takers, consumers in the Western world, who happily take these revolting substances and therefore create this enormous and disastrous trade that, as we know, leads to the tragic results that we are seeing at the moment, particularly in Mexico and other countries. That is not because of prohibition policy, it is because of a long-term policy of decriminalisation under which many, many people believe that effectively these drugs are legal.

Q272 Dr Huppert: Mr Hitchens, I am fascinated by what you say. As I understand it, you have been arguing that there has been a decriminalised policy since the 1971 Act, which actually did the criminalisation in the first place.

Peter Hitchens: Yes.

Q273 Dr Huppert: Currently, around 80,000 people in the UK are convicted or cautioned for possession of an illegal drug every year. If you think that is a decriminalised policy, how many do you think should be convicted or cautioned each year under your criminal policy?

Peter Hitchens: It is not the figures of convictions or arrests that you need to look at. It is the disposals of the cases when they actually come about. I should point out that, as far back as 1994, John O'Connor, a former head of the Scotland Yard Flying Squad, said, "Cannabis has been a decriminalised drug for some time now".

Dr Huppert: That is a fascinating quote but it is not actually an answer to my question.

Peter Hitchens: No, let's move on to the situation of cannabis, right? Excuse me for a moment while I consult my note here to get this absolutely right, because it is very, very important. In 2009 there were 162,610 cannabis cases handled by the police in England and Wales. That is the latest year for which I can obtain figures. Of these, 19,137 were dealt with through police cautions, which expire after three months and need not normally even be declared to employers; 11,492 resulted in penalty notices for disorder, which is an on-the-spot review that generally results in no punishment of any kind; 22,478 actually ended in court, and many of them did so because they were only one of several charges against the defendant; 86,593 were dealt with by the cannabis warning, which I just discussed with you, which is nothing.

Dr Huppert: Mr Hitchens, firstly—

Peter Hitchens: If I could just make the point I am making, the criminal justice system goes through the motions of pretending to enforce the law against drugs but it does not actually do so. You can possess a drug that is technically illegal in this country. You can be caught in possession of it by the police and nothing whatever will happen to you, and most people know that.

Q274 Dr Huppert: But, Mr Hitchens, we are talking about 162,000 cases, which strikes me as rather a lot.

Peter Hitchens: It is.

Q275 Dr Huppert: You are saying, collectively, 80,000 go through cannabis warnings. That still leaves 80,000 who are convicted or are cautioned, and that number has been the same since before cannabis warnings.

Peter Hitchens: They are not convicted. Cannabis warning is not a conviction.

Dr Huppert: Well, exactly.

Peter Hitchens: It has no legal status whatsoever.

Q276 Dr Huppert: Mr Hitchens, I am agreeing with you on that. In round figures, there are 80,000 who have cannabis warnings and 80,000 who are convicted or cautioned. You say that is not a proper criminal policy. I would like to know how many people you think ought to be convicted otherwise, and are you aware, for example, of the European Monitoring Centre that has looked across Europe and found no association between the severity of sanctions and the amount of drug use?

Peter Hitchens: Again, it depends on how you are measuring the severity of sanctions. The sanctions exist to some extent on the statute books of the countries involved but there are no sanctions being applied. Before the 1971 Act, I think you will find that 21% of persons arrested for cannabis possession were sent to prison immediately. Before the 1971 Act completely changed our laws, there was actually a sentence of imprisonment for possession of

cannabis that was frequently applied on a first offence. Now, you are caught by the police actually in possession of cannabis and they let you go and you do not even get a record.

Dr Huppert: Around 1,000 every year are jailed.

Chair: Dr Huppert, Mr Hitchens, if I just bring in Mrs Gyngell.

Kathy Gyngell: Yes. I would like to come back to Dr Huppert. The very interesting study done by the European Monitoring Centre, which he refers to, in fact not only shows that drug use in Britain is much higher than in nearly every other Western European country, and that problem drug use is about three times higher, but it shows that the criminalisation in the other countries, which have lower drug use, is much higher. The proportion of people who get convicted and sent to prison, startlingly in this country, is much lower than in the Netherlands, which adopt quite a rigorous approach to hard drug use and to cannabis cafes that break the law, which they do all the time.

Chair: Very helpful. Ms Brett, do you wish to add anything on this?

Mary Brett: No, I think the other two are much more clued up on this.

Kathy Gyngell: Can I just add?

Chair: Yes, of course.

Kathy Gyngell: President Santos said, on the BBC before Christmas, that as long as people in the UK sniff coke here, or in New York or Paris, we will suffer here. We all know that. At the moment, 2% of people sniff coke here. People, like Russell Brand, would like us to believe that this is common. It is still not common. It is common in certain circles. If you decriminalise drugs, the chances are the risk you take is the rate of usage would go up to the rate of smoking, which is about one-fifth of the adult population. I wonder if any of the Committee have stopped to think how they would feel about one-fifth of the Cabinet, one-fifth of their children's school teachers, one-fifth of doctors or nurses, possibly being able to sniff cocaine because it is not arrestable.

Chair: Ms Gyngell, the Committee met President Santos last month and we received the same message from him. But it is good of you to remind us.

Q277 Dr Huppert: Yes. I think President Santos has been quite clear that he would like to have discussions about decriminalisation because he sees it as a way of significantly reducing the harm, and it is very clear—

Kathy Gyngell: Perhaps he has given up on us reducing demand for drugs here.

Dr Huppert: He was very clear about the discussions that he would like to see on that. But can I ask all three of you, there is a lot of question in this area as to whether people look at the actual scientific evidence of the harms, look at the actual studies that are done and then reach a conclusion, or reach a conclusion first and then look for aspects of data that will support that. Are you all in favour of the idea that you should have evidence-based policy?

Chair: If we could have a brief answer from each and then we need to move on. Mr Hitchens.

Peter Hitchens: Of course I am, yes. Who would not be?

Kathy Gyngell: I am, but it is very abused. It can be evidence-based policy or it can be scientific tunnel vision. For example, the methadone trials, previous doctors giving evidence here say this is gold plated evidence. What do they demonstrate scientifically, that opiate addicts like opiates? Quite frankly, they demonstrate that if you give free opiates to addicts you will retain them in treatment for a while. They give evidence that it minorly reduces their dependency on street drugs. Other evidence shows that methadone drug deaths have gone up dramatically since this type of medicine was being used. So we have to be very careful about what counts, what is relevant and what is translatable.

Chair: Thank you. Mary Brett.

Mary Brett: Yes, it must be given on evidence. My particular concern is cannabis. There has been quite a lot of discussion already about cannabis. The facts and figures being given out about cannabis are inaccurate. They are misleading. If I talk about FRANK giving out things, the information, there are grave omissions in the cannabis information. The scientific evidence is there but a lot of it is being ignored, and I would like the opportunity later in the meeting to tell you about the harms of cannabis.

Q278 Chair: We do have other questions for you. Just quickly, do you think FRANK is a success or a failure? The Government's initiative.

Mary Brett: There are some very good bits about FRANK. But, no, I mean there was a survey in 2010 by Addaction, which found that only 10% of children would phone FRANK, would look to FRANK. This is the sort of thing that is coming through. I personally have had very negative vibes about FRANK from all sorts of people.

Chair: Very good. We will come and ask you further questions on education.

Q279 Michael Ellis: Mr Hitchens, I think you referred to the self-indulgence in the use of drugs?

Peter Hitchens: Yes.

Q280 Michael Ellis: Would you support the premise that it is not only those who are being self-indulgent who partake in the use of drugs. Do you accept that many people, certainly when they start out using drugs, are feeling unwanted, depressed, lonely and inadequate when they get into the first use of drugs, and that they need help? That they are in effect victims, too, and that sizeable efforts need to be made towards rehabilitation rather than just punishment?

Peter Hitchens: Personally, no. I think that taking drugs is a wrong thing to do. I think there is a good reason for there being a law against it, and if people do it they should be punished accordingly to the law. If we had held to that, then we would still have the levels of drug use, which we had before the 1971 Act, which were minimal. I don't think drug users should be indulged. I do not think the advocates of drug decriminalisation should be indulged either, as the previous witnesses were.

Michael Ellis: If I could just quickly ask the others?

Kathy Gyngell: I have to say I do differ with Peter here. I agree with much of what Mr Brand said about abstinence. I don't agree with his views on the legal status or otherwise of drugs. I do think drug addicts' behaviour needs confrontation, and then the follow on should be correct and it should be supportive. But I do think it should be quite conditional on a level of compliance and co-operation. I think the drug courts in America have been hugely successful, about 3,500 of them, and they have sentenced abstinence treatment. Our problem is we do not sentence abstinence treatment. We sentence people to further use synthetic opiates.

Q281 Lorraine Fullbrook: A quick clarification from Ms Gyngell. You were mentioning about coke use, for example, and how it would increase to the level of smokers if it was decriminalised, or legalised, and that the Committee should think about that. This has been a long inquiry and we have searched all over the world on this subject. Are you making the assumption that the Committee are in favour of decriminalisation or legalisation?

Kathy Gyngell: I was worried that you took your terms of reference, or apparently appeared to—and I indeed wrote to Mr Vaz about it—from the Global Commission on Drugs policy, which is basically a highly financed legalising lobby. That did disturb me because, equally, they had given out—and they were widely disseminated in the press—incorrect

figures about drug use spiralling out of control globally when, indeed, the UNODC shows quite clearly that it has been stable. So, that did concern me that your direction of travel may have been influenced by lobbies who are very much in favour of decriminalisation, and if that is not the case I am very happy to hear it.

Q282 Lorraine Fullbrook: Can I just say, we have travelled to Turkey, to the United States, to Colombia, and we will go to Portugal as well, and we have seen many witnesses, and I think it is fair to say that every person we have seen has given us different figures. So no two figures have been the same, whoever we speak to.

Kathy Gyngell: No, but there is only one. You either have to accept the statistics that are collected and used, and that is by the United Nations. That is reported in a huge report every year, and unfortunately the Global Commission slightly misused these figures, or reported them incorrectly, and it was a difference of 30% in the case of hard drugs. So that is my only point, and you did mention this particular body in the terms of reference of your inquiry.

Chair: Thank you. Please be assured that the Committee has not taken a view on any of these issues—that is why we are seeking evidence from the widest possible sources of witnesses—and at the end of the day we will then publish our results. We are not under the control of any individual group, as Mr Steve McCabe will show.

Q283 Steve McCabe: If I could ask Mr Hitchens and Ms Gyngell this question: from your experience, what do you think is the most effective way of schools warning children about the dangers of drugs?

Chair: Start with Mary Brett.

Steve McCabe: No. I will come to Mary Brett, but I was asking Mr Hitchens and Ms Gyngell, Chair.

Peter Hitchens: I don't claim any particular expertise in what schools should do. But I think if you have a properly enforced law, where cannabis possession, which is illegal, is punished when detected, then one of the most important things you will do is you will armour people, who are under strong peer pressure from their school fellows to take drugs, against that. You will give them a good reason. They can turn around and say, "No, I will not do that. I don't want to risk having a criminal record. I don't want to risk never being able to travel to the United States for the rest of my life. I don't think it's worth it". The whole purpose of a strongly enforced and clearly set out legal prohibition on drugs is to strengthen people against that sort of pressure. In schools it would be enormously useful if we had a proper law, if we enforced it and if it was seen to be enforced.

Kathy Gyngell: I agree. A clear statement about the law, by people who are responsible, is the thing that makes the most difference to children. The thing I found most difficult, when my teenage sons were growing up, was to find that cannabis had been declassified, and at one point I had a son telling me, "It's not against the law". I said, "Well, it is against the law". I think parents need the support of the law, in order to be very clear with their children, and being very clear with your children is the most effective way to prevent them using drugs in the first place. That is my own experience, and it has been borne out by my own experience, absolute clarity about the law and the wrongness of doing this and we have lost sight of that. We are very liberal. We are very casual.

Q284 Steve McCabe: Thank you very much. Ms Brett, I read that you had said that harm prevention has no place in the classroom, and I wondered if you could explain to the Committee what you meant by that and what you think about the comments we have just heard?

Mary Brett: Harm reduction has its place. If you have an addict, somebody dependent on something, then you can reduce the dose gradually and get them off. In my opinion, that is where harm reduction belongs, not in the classroom. You stand in front of a class, you have 30 children there, 90%-odd of them have absolutely no intention of taking drugs. The policy has been harm reduction for the last—I don't know—10 to 15 years, something like that, and harm reduction assumes that children will take drugs anyway so we need to show them how to do it safely. Now, we know there is no guaranteed safe way of taking any drug.

The other phrase that keeps cropping up all over the place is “informed choice”. I hope to be able to explain that they are not being properly informed at the moment, and—hold on—we are giving them the choice to do an illegal act? We don't give them a choice to pilfer or spray graffiti or anything like that. The choice in the QCA and DfES guidelines is from age seven. Seven-year-olds have extremely immature brains—I don't need to tell you that. The other thing about children choosing is they are completely incapable, because the risk-taking part of the brain develops before the inhibitory part of the brain, so the children are most likely going to take this risk. If you go in and give harm reduction advice to children, on the assumption they are going to take drugs anyway, which is rubbish because 30% or 40% of children may try them but the actual use of cannabis, in the 11 to 15-year-olds, regular use in the last year was 4.4%. It was very, very low. So you should not assume that they are going to take it.

So you give harm reduction advice—and on FRANK there still is harm reduction advice—in other words, this is the amount of mushrooms that people use, ecstasy, drink water, sip it. That is all harm reduction advice, and that sort of thing acts as a green light for children. I know instances where it has happened. They have gone on to FRANK's website. They have looked up the advice. They have taken the advice—and in the case of cannabis it has been removed now—but they have become psychotic.

Q285 Steve McCabe: I think the statement about the clear legal position is obvious. Mr Somers seemed to suggest that one of the problems of giving advice that young people might know not to be entirely accurate, is that it weakens the whole impact of your message. Do you have any sympathy with that view?

Mary Brett: With not giving advice—

Steve McCabe: He suggested that if youngsters are told things about drugs, which they know perfectly well are not entirely accurate, it may lead to them dismissing the entire message that you are trying to convey. I wondered if you had any sympathy with that view.

Mary Brett: If drug education is done properly. I was a biology teacher and I taught in a boys' grammar school for 30 years. I have researched cannabis for years now, I wrote a huge report in 2006 and I keep it updated. I have really gone into this in a big way. If you talk to children and explain it in a scientific way, but age appropriate obviously—because it was a boys' school of course they were interested in the scientific side anyway, give them the truth, don't exaggerate, don't patronise, just talk to them as sort of equals and give them the truth, the scientific truth—they will not take drugs. People get children wrong. The vast majority of children have no intention of taking drugs. What they want is good, accurate, really reliable information about drugs, so that they can say “No” to their peer group. Someone mentioned the peer groups earlier. Kids want excuses. I know this. They used to tell me, “Give us more information”. Parents used to take information away with them, so that they could talk to their children. If you do it honestly, clearly, are willing to be challenged, have your evidence, then you are 90%-odd there.

Steve McCabe: Thank you.

Q286 Mr Winnick: Mr Hitchens, is it your view that if there were a real hard line policy, more hard line than successive Governments have perceived, the number of people taking drugs would substantially fall?

Peter Hitchens: Yes, it is. I think it was the case. Obviously the arrival of cannabis in this country after the Second World War was a slow business. In 1945 the number of convictions for cannabis possession in the whole United Kingdom was four and in 1960 it was 235. Even in the early and mid 1960s it was only at a level of about 1,000. Since the 1971 Misuse of Drugs Act, which was itself an implementation of Baroness Wootton's report—which was not a call to legalisation but was in effect a call for the decriminalisation of cannabis, particularly—the numbers have gone up immensely. In 1972, before the Act had begun to take full effect, 12,599 cases, now we are up to 160,000 arrests a year in England and Wales alone, not including Scotland. There has obviously been an immense change. You can put some of that down to social change but how much of that social change can you attribute to the legal change and the increasing unwillingness of the legal system, and the police, to arrest, prosecute or punish for cannabis possession? I think they have to be linked.

Q287 Mr Winnick: The figures do confirm more or less what you have been saying. For example, the 2010-2011 British Crime Survey showed that some 2.2 million people were using cannabis, and one in six young people took cannabis. Are you really saying to this Committee that, if there were a harder policy, a large number of those people would simply stop because they would be frightened of being convicted in court and going to prison?

Peter Hitchens: Yes. But you must understand this has been a long, slow process of change that has been very gradual. The interesting thing about the 1971 Act is that it contained various mechanisms, including the ACMD, to put its provisions under constant review. The powers, as originally set out in 1971, have been substantially reduced, again and again, until the introduction—as I say, without legislation—of the cannabis warning, after the Brixton experiment of the early 1990s and the Runciman report. There has been a long, slow conveyor belt downwards, during which the penalties have been reduced. As a result, the police have found it increasingly tiresome and time wasting to bother enforcing a law that does not have any penalties. So you could not immediately reintroduce the provisions of 1971 and expect a revolutionary change, but what you certainly should not be thinking of doing is reducing those penalties still further and imagining that, by doing so, you are going to make anything better.

It is quite clear that, during the time when penalties have been reduced, things have grown worse. To argue, as so many people do—and I name this the Simon Jenkins' tendency above all—to say, over and over again, that we have a serious problem of over-enforced prohibition, “This is failing. Therefore, we must resort to total decriminalisation”, it is just not logical because the facts do not support it. We have not been prohibiting cannabis or indeed the class A drugs during that time.

Q288 Mr Winnick: So what you would be saying, Mr Hitchens—obviously you will correct me if I am wrong, heaven forbid that I should put words into your mouth—that if there were a far firmer policy by Government in effect what would be the position is that the drug war, as it is described, would be won?

Peter Hitchens: No. I don't think you can win it. That is trying to defeat human nature entirely. But you would certainly have much less drug abuse in this country.

If it is travelling abroad, I hope your Committee will be visiting Sweden, which is the one European country that has not generally taken the position of harm reduction and decriminalisation, either formal or informal. As a result, it has rather lower drug use, particularly of cannabis, than we do or I think than any other major European country.

Q289 Mr Winnick: I doubt if there is anyone here, certainly not on this Committee and I doubt in the House of Commons, who would have any sympathy with drug taking. I would be most surprised. Be that as it may, what would be your response to the view that prohibition rarely works? The example that is given time and again, whether it is one that you would accept, is prohibition of alcohol in the States that collapsed totally. You would say there is no comparison between the two?

Peter Hitchens: You can certainly put those words into my mouth. There is an enormous difference, for instance, between them. If you have all day we can go into the problem of alcohol, which I think in this country should be much more severely restricted. I think we should return to the 1915 licensing laws, at the very least. But to prohibit a drug that had been in common use for hundreds or indeed thousands of years—or in the case of the United States had never been illegal—and to try and introduce laws prohibiting it; laws, I might add, that had exactly the same failure as our anti-drug laws, in that they prosecuted supply and transport but not possession. So to appeal to that, and say that failed and, therefore, any attempt to not so much prohibit as to interdict and discourage the use of drugs, to say that, because of that one particular, individual, specific failure, in a culture very different to our own, we can never attempt, ever again in the rest of the history of the human race, to try and prevent the spread of unpleasant, damaging and dangerous drugs, just seems to me to be, again, illogical and not evidence-based.

Q290 Mr Winnick: One more question. Heaven forbid, as I said before, that I should put words into your mouth but it was a question. There is another view that obviously I would assume you don't accept, namely that the drug traders, the arch criminals—and they are among the worst kind of criminals—who do their utmost to encourage people to take drugs, would they not be rather keen on a policy that Governments have pursued? But if it were different, if it were legalised—and this is where I give a view, I am not suggesting it is mine—if it were decriminalised the drug dealers would be rather upset, to say the least?

Peter Hitchens: I don't believe so. For instance, alcohol and cigarettes are both legal in this country. Yet both are either smuggled, or produced illicitly, by criminal gangs in this country in quite large quantities. Unless you made drugs free of charge, and gave them away on street corners, there would still be plenty. Given the fact that a lot of the people who like to take drugs are, by the nature of the lives they lead, unable to afford them out of their own productive activity, the chances are there would always be an opportunity for criminal gangs. Also it is—

Q291 Mr Winnick: Presumably far fewer.

Peter Hitchens: No. I don't think so. There is no reason to suppose so. What might well be the case, if you were to legalise or decriminalise drugs entirely, is that you would increase criminal activity rather than reduce it because of this precise problem: people who want to take drugs are often the kind of people who don't particularly want to pay for them. The solution we have come up with for this at the moment—the methadone programme and various adjuncts to that—instead of drug takers and abusers stealing from individuals to fund their habit, Government steals from the taxpayer to fund the habit of the drug takers, and we are told that this is some kind of advance.

Chair: Thank you. We have to move on.

Peter Hitchens: If that is not organised crime I don't know what is.

Q292 Bridget Phillipson: Just returning to the area of education. Obviously we have talked a lot about illegal drug use, but I would be interested to hear your views about alcohol

and education for young people. Because often alcohol is a drug that is most easily accessible to young people and often gives rise to the most obvious harm in communities, such as anti-social behaviour. What role do you feel education has in terms of alcohol and drugs and the linkages there?

Mary Brett: I used to do the same amount of time on alcohol and tobacco as I did on the whole of the drugs. I had very little time; higher academic schools, very little time for anything like this. But I used to talk about alcohol in the same way and explain exactly what it does to the brain, the body and everything. One thing that used to amaze the children—I did this in year 9, which is 13 to 14—a lot of them were never told that alcohol can actually kill them, they can overdose and the respiration muscles are suppressed and they can die.

So again, you give them all the facts, the true scientific facts, whatever, you throw in a few social things and so on. I have approached the whole of the health education I was in charge of, in the same way, in the same scientific, factual way, speaking as equals and not patronising, not talking down to them, and just explaining exactly what would happen. That has a huge effect on children. If they know exactly how alcohol or drugs is going to affect the body then they are with you.

Peter Hitchens: Just a very small point about this. One thing that is very dangerous is to link legal alcohol with illegal drugs. They should be dealt with separately. The fact that some drugs are illegal should be repeatedly stressed, and to confuse the legal and the illegal drug is actually to confuse the mind of the child.

Kathy Gyngell: I certainly think that the idea that legal sanctions have no impact is, of course, not true and I think the risk of removing those sanctions would definitely be a significant increase in use. As Paul Hayes said to your Committee the other week, at the moment 0.6% of the population use heroin and crack, and it is a declining proportion. That means 99.4% do not. We know that only a few percent use cannabis, 2% use cocaine. The idea that you would risk increasing use and, therefore, increasing the demand that would then impact on countries abroad, to which we also have a moral responsibility, I find extraordinary. That you would be at this point of still fairly low usage, but disproportionately damaging usage, that you will be thinking of putting the white flag up to use and risk it rising to levels that are something like smoking, I find this a very strange way to think at all.

Certainly, with education for children on cannabis I think the most important thing now is that we should be focusing on the domestic skunk market, which is the pressing problem in this country that is within our power to deal with. We have blithely stopped protecting children. We know skunk now causes psychosis. We don't know what is happening in gangs in South London and knife crime, and what role psychosis is playing there. This is something that I think should be the pressing concern of the Committee. This is stuff we can deal with here at home.

Chair: The Committee is going to deal with all these issues. This is a long, detailed inquiry and that is very helpful. Nicola Blackwood has the final question.

Q293 Nicola Blackwood: If along the lines of this debate more people are being convicted and sent to prison, one of the big problems that we have is the wide availability of drugs in prison, which is reported and rumoured but there is very little solid evidence for. I understand the Policy Exchange published a report in January, which claims that one of the big problems was corrupt staff, in particular, alleging that around 1,000 corrupt members of staff were involved in this issue, which is about seven prison officers per prison. Do you think that this is accurate and do you have any evidence to support these claims?

Kathy Gyngell: The Centre for Policy Studies, prior to that paper, we also published our own paper about keeping drugs out of prisons. There are a number of issues involved that could be addressed, and one very big one would be the consistent and comprehensive use of

sniffer dogs. At the moment there are not that many teams of dogs, they are laid off, it can be judged when they are on or off. There are so many holes in the system for keeping drugs out of prison. What we have done over the last few years is spent more than £100 million on introducing methadone into prisons as the first line treatment. There have been huge worries that that itself is adding to the illicit currency, drugs currency, and putting prisoners at risk. Maybe you would like to ask the question: how would it have been in those years that £100 million was spent on plugging the holes, whether it is over the wall, whether it is corrupt staff, lack of sniffer dogs, lack of control over mobile phones? If the money had been spent to toughen up all those things, it would be interesting to know what would have happened in the prisons since then.

Chair: Thank you. Mr Hitchens.

Peter Hitchens: It is a measure of the moral and legal disarmament of this country, in the face of drug use, that in prisons, which above all should be under the control of the law and the Government, we have serious drug abuse. I think it tells you probably more clearly than anything else how far the de facto decriminalisation of drugs has gone in this country that they are prevalent in our prisons.

Q294 Chair: Yes, Mr Hitchens, you are absolutely right, prisons are one of the areas that this Committee will look at very, very carefully. You are absolutely right to raise it with us. Do you want to add anything, Mary Brett, to Nicola Blackwood's question?

Mary Brett: Not really, but I have a few burning points I would really like to make.

Chair: Could you give them very quickly. I have the Home Secretary hanging around in the corridor outside, and I do not want to keep her waiting any longer.

Mary Brett: You are putting me under pressure.

Chair: You could always write to us with these points, but the main points if you could tell us what they are.

Mary Brett: Can I just say a few points about cannabis, which are not understood?

Chair: Of course.

Mary Brett: One is the strength. There are a lot of myths about the strength of it. The last proper Home Office potency study was in 2008. At that time skunk, which is 80% of our cannabis market, was 16.2% THC, which is a psycho-active drug. Herbal cannabis in the 1960s and 1970s was 1% to 2%. You see, FRANK says skunk is two to four times stronger than herbal cannabis. Wrong. You can hardly get herbal cannabis now. The other 20% of the market is hash, which is about 4% to 6%. With this huge THC strength with skunk this is doing an awful lot more damage. The Dutch have just banned any THC over 15%, because they are now looking at skunk as a hard drug and we should be doing the same.

Chair: That is extremely helpful, and I think on the other points that you wish to raise with us, if you could write to us. That would be extremely helpful indeed.

Mary Brett: I will. Thank you very much.

Chair: I am afraid I am going to have to call this session to a close, as I say, because, we have other witnesses. Thank you very much for coming in, all three of you, Mr Hitchens, Ms Gyngell and Ms Brett. We may well write to you again, and please feel free to write to me if you think the Committee is going off in the wrong direction. We are very keen to know this because we want to make sure that this is a very thorough inquiry, and it will go on several months. Thank you very much for coming in.