

THE NUTT CASE AND ITS SEQUELAE: HAVE MINISTERS GOT THE MESSAGE?



Lord Nicolas Rea

During a welcome period of increasing co-operation between science and Government, the summary dismissal of Professor Nutt as Chairman of the Advisory Committee on the Misuse of Drugs by Alan Johnson, the Home Secretary, caused consternation in the scientific community and the resignation of five other members of the ACMD. The reason given by the Home Secretary for his action was that he had “lost confidence in Professor Nutt as my principal drugs adviser”*. This was ostensibly because of a peer-reviewed article and a lecture by Prof Nutt which were critical of the current Home Office system of classification of the harmfulness of drugs. These presentations had been made by Professor Nutt in his capacity as an academic neuropsychopharmacologist, not as chairman of the ACMD. Media reporting, however, may not have made this clear.

Professor Paul Wiles, Chief Scientific Officer at the Home Office, had alerted Professor Nutt that his forthcoming peer-reviewed paper in the *Journal of Psychopharmacology* in January 2009: *Equasy: an overlooked addiction with implications for the current debate on drug harms* (showing that horse

riding caused a comparable number of deaths to ecstasy/MDMA as well as severe spinal injuries) “might be perceived as insensitive”. He was duly castigated for allowing this paper to be published by the then Home Secretary, Jacqui Smith, whose office [according to Alan Johnson], had received “multiple complaints” from the parents of children who had been harmed by ecstasy*. (But none apparently from the parents of those who had been harmed by falling off horses).

In his Eve Saville Lecture at King’s College in July 2009: *Estimating Drug Harms: a Risky Business*, Professor Nutt lucidly described the problems involved in classifying the harmfulness of different drugs objectively, pointing out, as in the *Equasy* paper, that some legal substances and activities, in this case drinking alcohol or smoking tobacco, are in fact more harmful than many illegal drugs (a fact well known to those working in the addiction field). He suggested that any rational classification of relative harmfulness should recognise this and that this classification should be based on objective criteria of harm under three headings: physical harm, dependency, and social harm, and that this assessment should

be carried out by an expert group, qualified to obtain and assess the evidence, free from political influences. However he explicitly recognised the need for a political input in formulating drugs policy as a whole. The paper was carefully written in a non polemical style and convincing evidence was given to support every point made.

Relations between the ACMD and the Government have been less than cordial since the rejection of the ACMD’s recommendations that Ecstasy/MDMA be downgraded from class A to B and that Cannabis remain a class C drug. These Government decisions were made for political rather than scientific reasons and were taken despite the requirement in the Misuse of Drugs Act, 1971, that the MDMA (which was set up by the Act) be consulted on any proposed changes to drug classification.

On November 6th, a week after Professor Nutt’s dismissal, a group of scientists, including some of the most eminent, produced: a *Statement of Principles for the Treatment of Independent Scientific Advice*, with the assistance of “Sense about Science”. This was presented by Lord Rees, President of the Royal Society, to the Prime Minister and copies sent to Lord Drayson, Minister for Science, and Professor John Beddington, the Chief Scientist. These Principles are given in full in the Report of the House of Commons Science and Technology Select Committee of

... Professor Nutt has announced the formation of a new Independent Scientific Committee on Drugs, which will be completely independent of Government



Dec 9th 2009.* They emphasise the need for scientists who advise the Government to be free to publish and promote their work: "In the context of independent scientific advice, disagreement with Government policy and the public articulation and discussion of relevant evidence and issues by members of advisory committees cannot be grounds for criticism or dismissal". The spirit of the Principles was accepted by Lord Drayson, who said on 23rd November: "... it is (so) important for the Government to reiterate the importance of the independence of scientific advice, and to have clarity

between the scientific community and the Government on the rules of engagement between the two." Following this a document: *Principles on scientific advice to Government* was published on 15th December by the Government Office for Science which has invited views on it as part of the consultation on *The Guidelines for the Use of Scientific Analysis* (published earlier) which runs until 9th February. These principles meet many of the points covered by Lord Rees' document. However it contains one paragraph which is not compatible with these: "The Government and its scientific advisers should work

together to reach a shared position, and neither should act to undermine mutual trust". It is difficult to reconcile this with true independence for scientific advisers whose findings may well point in a different direction to current Government policy. For example, the policy of the "shared position" had a serious effect in delaying effective action in the BSE epidemic. It is to be hoped that when the new guidelines are published this paragraph will have been altered so that the independence of scientific advisers is properly protected in the future.

At the time of going to press Professor Nutt has announced the formation of a new

Independent Scientific Committee on Drugs, which will be completely independent of Government. The Committee will include those who have resigned from the ACMD as well as other scientists expert in the drugs field. Its findings and reports – and the Government's response – are awaited with great interest.

*Ref: House of Commons Science and Technology Committee: *The Government's Review of the principles applying to the treatment of independent scientific advice to government*. Third Report of Session 2009-10, Vols I and II

THE ROLE OF THE CHIEF SCIENTIFIC ADVISER, MINISTRY OF DEFENCE



Professor Mark Welland FRS FREng
MOD Chief Scientific Adviser
Professor of Nanotechnology,
University of Cambridge

Since the Second World War, scientific advisers have played a critical and integral role in Britain's defence. The strength of the relationship between military commanders and defence researchers was recognised in the creation of the post of Chief Scientific Adviser (CSA), which has existed for as long as the Ministry of Defence itself. The formal responsibilities of the role have hardly changed since then.

As well as the core remit of providing scientific advice to the most senior members of the Department and the Armed Forces, the CSA chairs both the Research and Development Board and the Investment Approvals Board. The breadth of the role offers the opportunity to inspect, investigate and interrogate almost any programme to almost any level, placing the CSA at the very heart of MOD's Science and

Technology programme.

At the same time, however, the detail of the role has changed dramatically, and continues to change, and the other privilege that the job carries is having both the ability and the duty to shape its exact nature to the specific challenges of today – and tomorrow. At a time of rapidly changing threats to Britain and to our Armed Forces abroad, as well as of the ever-increasing pace of scientific

development, it is crucial that MOD remains at the very forefront of defence technology.

There are new challenges for us to respond to. In the coming years it will be vitally important for Britain's Armed Forces to reduce their dependence on fossil fuels, for operational reasons as well as to combat climate change, so research into alternative sources of power are high on our agenda. The threat from Improvised Explosive