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1997– : Eradication to Realism?

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the period from mid-1997 and outlines the main developments in prison drugs policy which are planned for the next decade. On 1 May 1997, Labour won the general election. Their victory heralded the opportunity for new ideas, discourses and issues to infiltrate policy agendas. However, during the lead up to the election, the party had successfully reinvented and repositioned itself as New Labour, signalling ‘the end of Old Labour, old policies and old wel-farism’ (MacGregor, 1998d: 251). ‘Soft’ policies on crime, drugs, welfare dependency, and the family were replaced by ‘tough’ new policies. Although there have been significant changes and reforms within public policy since the election of New Labour, the remnants of Tory populism remain, and some of the new policies possess a striking continuity to the old. During this period, ‘policy feedbacks’ or the ways in which the legacy of established policies and inherited policy structures shape and constrain what is possible within policy development, have been significant for the new government (Skocpol, 1992). Policy development in all areas, including prisons and drugs, has also been heavily influenced by transferring the ideas and discourses from the United States.

This chapter begins by highlighting the main developments in drugs and penal policy since the 1997 election, which provide the backdrop for the changes within prison drugs policy. Borrowing ideas from American drugs policy, an anti-drugs co-ordinator or ‘drugs tsar’ was appointed who was to guide, co-ordinate and implement the new national drugs strategy. The new strategy did not, however, mark a significant departure from the previous one, Tackling Drugs Together.
The ‘managerial’ discourses around assessment, targets, performance, partnership and co-ordination intensified. Despite the increased focus on prevention and treatment, it will be argued that the punitive discourses of ‘enforcement’, ‘control’ and ‘punishment’ have endured. Policy-makers and politicians have become increasingly preoccupied with the relationship between drugs and crime and the role of the criminal justice system in dealing with drugs was further enhanced. Similarly, developments in penal policy under Labour have not indicated a fundamental overhaul of previous Conservative policies. Labour’s ‘tough on crime’ policies have not been successfully integrated with their ‘tough on the causes of crime’ policies and the populist punitive rhetoric of earlier phases of policy development has continued.

In the latter part of the chapter, the nature and extent of the drug ‘problem’ in prison is explored by examining three key pieces of research commissioned by the Prison Service and their review of the 1995 prison drugs strategy. As Spector and Kitsuse (1977) argue, an official response or implementation of policy is not the final stage of a social problem. The process continues whereby ‘second generation’ problems arise through existing policies and form the basis for new responses or policy reforms. In the construction of second generation social problems, ‘assertions about the inadequacy, inefficacy, or injustice of the procedures may themselves become the conditions around which new social problem activities are organized’ (Spector and Kitsuse, 1977: 151). Thus, during this phase of policy development, the concern was not so much around the drug problem itself, but with the policies and procedures which had been designed to eradicate it and the growing contradiction between treatment and punishment.

The evaluation of the 1995 prison drugs strategy highlighted problems around mandatory drug testing (MDT) procedures and inadequacies in treatment provision. The revised 1998 strategy represents an attempt to ameliorate some of the problems raised by the policy network during the previous phases of policy development. In many ways, these reforms denote a new ‘realism’ or pragmatism in relation to tackling the drug ‘problem’ in prison compared to the previous strategy and an attempt to rebalance the strategy towards treatment and care for drug using prisoners. However, the basic punitive framework for delivering the strategy remains intact and the emphasis on the discourses of ‘security’, ‘control’ and ‘punishment’ has continued. It remains to be seen whether the balance between treatment and punishment will be dramatically altered. In the process of attempting to