

# Britain



## Dealing with drug addiction

# Hard to swallow

It is difficult to trust the policies of a government that keeps its evidence secret

LOVED ones of addicts often make the same complaint: the worst thing is the deception. By hiding their habit from the world, sufferers hurt their families; more to the point, secrecy sets back their chances of seeking treatment and recovering.

So it is with drugs policy. In July the Home Office released a suspiciously cheery analysis of its work, as part of the preparations for a big overhaul of its long-term drugs strategy that is due to be unveiled this month. The evidence was so glowing that the Statistics Commission, an official watchdog, complained that it read "more like a briefing document" than a balanced presentation. There were more hints of manipulation this week when the home secretary, Jacqui Smith, had to write to her drugs-advisory council to reassure its members that she would not ignore their views on cannabis, against which she seems determined to stiffen sanctions.

Now, new evidence has emerged of the gulf between the government's public pronouncements on drugs and its private findings. An internal report by the Treasury, seen by *The Economist*, gives a plain-spoken account of how the drugs strategy was working in 2001. Parts of the document, recently obtained by Transform, a drugs-policy think-tank, are encouraging, and some of its criticisms may have been met since then. But some still stick—and the government's reluctance to make it public sooner

raises questions about its willingness to deal fairly with the facts now.

The report is kindest about treatment for drug-users, which gets five stars (the top mark) for effectiveness; three stars go to education programmes and the referral of arrested addicts. But on law enforcement, the most expensive plank of the anti-drugs strategy, things fall apart. Police-intelligence work scores two out of five, as does that of customs officers. At street level it gets worse: cracking down on drug-dealing and drug-related crime rates only one star, whereas action on "soft" drugs such as cannabis scores none at all.

The Home Office now says that it has upped its game, revamping the national serious-crime squad and referring more offenders for treatment. But it is still spouting some arguments that the 2001 report privately debunked. On intercepted imports, for example, the Treasury noted that although seizures had increased, the ever-falling price of drugs in Britain suggested that "in large measure rising totals [of seized drugs] reflect rising volumes of drug imports." Despite this, the analysis the government gave the public last year presented increasing drug seizures as evidence of diminishing availability.

Much of the 35-page Treasury report criticised the lack of rigorous analysis as to what worked. Evaluations were "process rather than output focused". On the issue

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of tackling the supply of drugs, it found "little evidence on the cost effectiveness of [criminal-justice] activities", and "that little we have does not offer strong support."

This might have been of interest to the voters whose money was being spent on such untested schemes. Steve Rolles of Transform says the Home Office is still sitting on two reports from last year that it deems too sensitive for release.

Yet evidence has seldom been more in demand. Though the government is unlikely to shift its stance on prohibiting most drugs whatever the evidence, its policy on treatment for drug-users, so far a relative strength, may be up for change.

At a drop-in centre in Hounslow, an unglamorous suburb in west London, clients (as the addicts are respectfully known) are relaxing with candle-lit acupuncture. Downstairs they can pick up syringes (in different colours, to avoid accidental sharing) and other paraphernalia to smoke or shoot up more safely. A centre over the road prescribes and dispenses methadone, an oral substitute for heroin addicts.

"Harm-reduction" facilities such as these have become more common under Labour, which has more than doubled since 1998 the number of drug-takers who go to them. Partly because of this, British heroin addicts are less likely to be HIV-positive than those in many countries. Yet there are hints that such thinking is falling out of favour. After it emerged last year that as few as 3% of those in treatment actually shake their habit, the Conservatives vowed "to solve addiction, not manage it" through residential courses where addicts get off drugs altogether. (As such courses

Jonathan Rosenthal, who writes about business for the Britain section, has won the Work Foundation's WorkWorld Media award for the best feature of 2007.

► cost roughly ten times more than a year of methadone, however, it is unlikely that most would have access to them.) Mike Ashton of DrugScope, a charity, cautions that the relative success of residential programmes may be due to the fact that only the best candidates are chosen for them.

A different strategy is to go farther down the harm-reduction route. One service that the clients in Hounslow are denied is a safe place in which to take their drugs; the lavatories even have locks on them to prevent illicit use. Providing “shooting galleries” where drug-users can inject themselves has been tried in some countries, to mixed reviews so far. And prescribing heroin rather than methadone might attract more drug-takers to safe surroundings, though it is dearer to procure and supervise since it tends to be injected.

It is hard to make such choices because, despite the Treasury’s warnings seven years ago, much evidence is still limited to processes rather than results. That is, as far as we know: after all, the Home Office is still sitting on some of it. Perhaps the government should come clean. As the Hounslow clients are told daily, denial is not a healthy option. ■

#### British films

## A fistful of sterling

#### Hollywood’s startlingly British blockbusters

**A**MID the flood of delicately-bared shoulders and exquisitely-cut suits that will swamp the red carpet at Britain’s BAFTA film awards on February 10th will be a smattering of people less well-dressed and not nearly as photogenic as the stars and directors being honoured. The apparatchiks who finance and promote Britain’s cosseted film industry will, however, be every bit as self-congratulatory. Several British films were hits at the box office last year and are set to sweep up awards on both sides of the Atlantic.

Yet behind the scenes is a deep sense of disquiet as to just how British some of these blockbusters are. Among productions nominated for best British film—“Atonement”, for instance, and “This is England”—is “The Bourne Ultimatum”. It is made by Universal, an American studio; the cast is American; and the film could well have come straight out of Hollywood.

Such labelling is no mere curiosity, for public subsidies are ladled out to producers who can convince the government that their films are “culturally British”. A tax credit came into force last year with the aim of fostering an industry that expresses



Much to atone for

British culture and national identity. It allows film-makers to claim tax rebates worth as much as 16% of the cost of big productions and 20% of smaller ones.

Oxford Economics, a consultancy, reckons that the tax breaks are crucial to the success of a business that employs some 33,500 people in Britain and contributes more than £4 billion (\$3.8 billion) a year to the economy. Were they to be abolished, film production in Britain would shrink drastically, the economists say in a report paid for by the state-funded Film Council.

The more generous tax credit that the current one replaced cost the public purse almost £500m a year; the Treasury reckons the newer version will divert a more modest £120m a year, an estimate that some think low. Film-makers also get direct subsidies from the government and National Lottery of about £55m a year for worthy aims such as developing talent and fostering public appreciation of film.

Oddly, though, the main beneficiaries of Britain’s tax hand-outs seem to be big American studios. This is because the tax breaks make it some 23% cheaper to make a movie in Britain than in America, according to Oxford Economics. That price differential attracts big studios that are shopping around for the cheapest place to film. But it does nothing to reduce the risks that the movie will be a box-office dud. That is a likelier outcome for British studios than for American ones because Britain’s domestic market is much smaller and Americans’ appetite for foreign films is limited.

Nor do the subsidies do much to promote British culture. It is too easy to pass the test that determines whether a film is sufficiently British to be worthy of state support. Because the criteria include where a film is set and the nationality of its main characters, actors and scriptwriters, film-makers can easily qualify by adding a few minor details, such as shoot-outs in

Waterloo station and the assassination in the first few minutes of a British journalist (both features of “The Bourne Ultimatum”). Even these literary touches may be unnecessary: films such as “Dark Knight”, a Batman movie set in mythical Gotham City, also qualify for subsidy because chunks are filmed in Britain and they employ local people in important positions.

Such fretting is not new. When the country first passed laws supporting film-making in 1927, it forced cinemas to show a minimum quota of British films, arguing that they needed special protection. Little seems to have changed since then. ■

#### Privacy and politicians

## Bugbears all round

#### Britain’s web of surveillance ensnares an MP

**B**BRITONS who believe they are unduly snooped on seldom want for proof: CCTV cameras and DNA databases perturb many in a country famous for its attachment to privacy. Further cause for concern emerged on February 3rd, when it was revealed that conversations between Sadiq Khan, a Labour MP, and Babar Ahmad, his constituent and long-time friend, had been bugged by counter-terrorism officers. The encounters took place in 2005 and 2006 in a prison in Milton Keynes, just north of London, where Mr Ahmad is awaiting deportation to America to face charges of raising money for nasty causes by running terrorist-friendly websites.

Under a convention established in 1966 by Harold Wilson, the prime minister of the day, MPs are exempt from some types ►►