

Prison is the right place for criminals who are on drugs

LABOUR'S policy on drug crime is a classic symbol of Britain's moral decline. Despite the misery and fear spread by the drugs culture, our politicians, courts and police are so enfeebled that they have almost given up trying to enforce the law.

They treat drug abuse not as a serious crime that should be punished but as a medical problem that requires support. So we end up in the absurd situation of drug offenders being given welfare handouts and therapy rather than the prison terms they deserve.

Even worse, drug abuse is now to be used by the courts as grounds for mitigation in such crimes as burglary and theft.

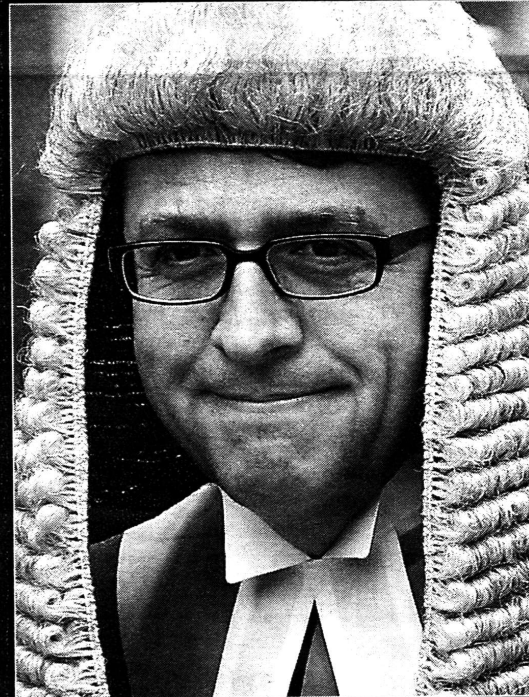
According to new guidelines from the Sentencing Advisory Panel, a judicial quango set up by Labour to oversee the courts system, judges should avoid jailing drug-addicted criminals. Instead, argues the Panel, the courts should consider ordering convicted defendants to undergo a treatment programme "in an attempt to break the cycle of addiction and offending".

Sometimes it feels as if we are living in a madhouse. There is neither logic nor morality behind the idea that the punishment for one crime should be reduced by reference to another crime. Drug-taking is against the law, so such a habit should be a reason for lengthening, not lowering, a sentence. It would be like letting off a burglar because he is also a shoplifter or going soft on a rapist because he is also a mugger.

NOT only do the guidelines make a mockery of justice but they also provide a perverse encouragement of drug abuse, since criminals will know that they only have to bleat about their fondness for crack cocaine to escape a spell behind bars.

Indeed, in practice this is already happening thanks to the climate of appeasement towards drugs that has enveloped the justice system.

In one outrageous recent case, a habitual criminal from Gloucestershire, Dean Weaver, owned up to no fewer than 145 crimes, including house raids, burglaries and car thefts, a catalogue of law-breaking for which he could have received 14 years. Yet because Weaver was an addict receiving treat-



LENIENT: Judge Picton gave a community sentence



Leo McKinstry
Daily Express columnist

ment, the judge Martin Picton did not even send him to prison but instead gave him a two-year community sentence.

This whole strategy is one of surrender masquerading as compassion. By signalling its capitulation, the State is effectively legalising drug use. These disastrous guidelines will only lead to more criminal activity and more drug-taking, even though drug abuse already inflicts a terrible burden on the nation, shattering families, destroying neighbourhoods, promoting welfare dependency and costing the taxpayer an estimated £20 billion a year.

The supporters of leniency, led by the Sentencing Advisory

Panel, like to pretend that their soft approach will ultimately reduce crime because addicts, having been helped to recover, will no longer have to steal to pay for their habits.

To back up this thesis, it is often said that more than 60 per cent of all crime in Britain is drug-related. Reduce the incidence of drug abuse through medical intervention and you will reduce the overall amount of crime, goes the argument.

But such thinking is based on a fundamental fallacy. Persistent drug offenders are not innocent victims of a medical disease. They are arrogant, vicious parasites, devoid of any sense of social

responsibility and filled with contempt for everyone but themselves. They are usually into drugs because they are criminals rather than criminals because they are into drugs. They carry on with their lives of substance-fuelled crime because they know they have absolutely nothing to fear from the useless courts and police.

It has become a fashionable conventional wisdom to claim that the "war on drugs" has failed. But it was a war that was never even started. The addicts and pushers had triumphed before the first shot was ever fired. Instead of getting tough, the authorities created a vast drug rehabilitation and support industry full of counsellors, therapists, action teams and outreach workers, all peddling the lie addicts have succumbed to a condition rather than made a selfish lifestyle choice.

OVER £200 million worth of drug substitutes, such as methadone for heroin users, are being dished out annually, while in 2008 more than 50,000 addicts received disability benefits because of their habits. Only in morally corrupt Britain would criminal behaviour be a justification for a weekly welfare handout.

But the drugs welfare industry has failed dismally. Contrary to its overblown predictions it has promoted drug-related crime and substance abuse. Rehabilitation courses have been a scandalous waste of money, with fewer than three per cent of users cured each year. Yet the solution is simple: drug addicts should be treated like the dangerous lawbreakers they are and sent to jail.

That is the only way to break the cycle. As one former prisoner said with an honesty that is all too often lacking in this debate: "I spent six years trying to get off drugs. Going to prison saved my life."

Drug users are as bad as pushers. They both belong in jail. We should dismantle the whole drugs industry now and put the money into building more prisons. All that is needed is the political will.

A government that can put cameras in wheelie bins and cover the country with speed cameras could crack down on drugs if it wanted. But under Labour, we will continue our headlong descent into a European version of Colombia.

'This is surrender sold to us as compassion'