

DON'T EVEN THINK ABOUT IT!

NEW LABOUR'S WAR AGAINST STATES OF MIND

DAVID THOMPSON

“The belief in mental illness, as something other than man’s trouble in getting along with his fellow man, is the proper heir to the belief in demonology and witchcraft. Mental illness is ‘real’ in exactly the same sense in which witches are ‘real’ ... I am not saying that personal unhappiness and socially deviant behaviour do not exist; what I am saying is that we categorise them as diseases at our own peril. ...”

Thomas Szasz, *Ideology and Insanity*, 1970

DISREGARD FOR THE MOST RUDIMENTARY LEGAL SAFEGUARDS

The Government’s announced intent to unleash the people of Britain looks set to find expression in ever more peculiar and unanticipated forms. Of all New Labour’s brave new freedoms, Home Secretary Jack Straw’s proposed extension of the Mental Health Act 1983 is perhaps the most revealing. Ostensibly

intended to liberate the public from a hitherto unacknowledged fear of molestation by the insane, the bill outlines extraordinary new powers to detain those deemed to be in possession of *Dangerously Severe Personality Disorders*. If an individual unfortunate enough to be stalked by social workers, psychiatrists and probation officers is diagnosed as so possessed, the Home Secretary’s solution is to



Political Notes No. 163



ISSN 0267-7059

ISBN 1 85637 486 6

An occasional publication of the Libertarian Alliance, 25 Chapter Chambers, Esterbrooke Street, London SW1P 4NN

www.libertarian.co.uk

email: admin@libertarian.co.uk

© 2000: Libertarian Alliance; David Thompson.

David Thompson (email: david.thompson@eidonet.co.uk) is a musician and freelance writer. He co-founded Time Recording’s acclaimed Emit album series in 1994 and was the label’s A&R director for five years, developing a catalogue of diverse and innovative electronic music, including collaborations with Brian Eno, Michael Brook and David Sylvian. He has recorded both for Emit and for other independents, including Kai-Tonk in Japan, and New York’s Instinct and Rey-D labels. He has contributed essays, profiles and reviews on musical and related themes to *The Independent*, the *New Statesman*, the subculture quarterly *Immerse*, the arts papers *Variant* and *Mute*, and to the more mainstream titles *Urb* (Los Angeles) and *DJ* magazine (London). His most recent articles have profiled the work of Joanna MacGregor’s SoundCircus label and the Unknown Public CD series. He has also written about the morality of marketing, about the significance of Star Trek, and the article “Unsound Practice” on the current decline in critical standards which has been published on several websites and translated for the German music magazine *Superstar*.

The views expressed in this publication are those of its author, and not necessarily those of the Libertarian Alliance, its Committee, Advisory Council or subscribers.

Director: Dr Chris R. Tame

Editorial Director: Brian Micklethwait

Webmaster: Dr Sean Gabb

FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

subject that person's liberty to a pre-emptive, and more intimate, violation. As the DSPD sufferer is determined, with apparently supernatural foresight, to pose a potential future danger to the public, he or she will be subject to indefinite incarceration and forcible medication. In effect, they will be shown just what suffering *really* is.

Despite the alarming consequences that look sure to follow DSPD diagnosis, press briefings by the Home Secretary and Frank Dobson made no reference to the failure of the psychiatric industry to arrive at a sufficiently precise and unambiguous definition of what DSPD actually is.

A similar disregard for the most rudimentary of legal safeguards can be found in Straw's proposals to confiscate the property and assets of *suspected* drug dealers. Both bills all but dispense with the customary formalities of hard evidence and reasonable doubt, effectively shifting the burden of proof from prosecutor to defendant. Rumour, suspicion and speculation would appear sufficient criteria for the Government's fast-track shortcut to justice.

With eerie symmetry, both supporters and critics of these bills seem oblivious to the contradictions of a Home Secretary waging war on people who choose to administer mood altering drugs to themselves, whilst simultaneously advocating the *forcible* drugging of individuals with far more potent mood altering substances.

AN UNPRECEDENTED ASSAULT ON PERSONAL LIBERTY

In an age that offers no end of opportunities to feel alienated, murderous or insane, the number of potentially homicidal monsters thought to be loose on the nation's streets is remarkably small. Set against a population of roughly sixty million, the six hundred or so disordered souls reckoned to be at large hardly seem to pose an intolerable statistical threat to public safety. The theoretical risk presented by this vanishingly small minority has been so grossly overstated, and faced so little criticism, that much of the recent debate has veered uncomfortably close to darkly comic parody.

Exactly how does one refute *acausal* accusations, short of finding a lawyer equipped with a time machine? The Government's finest minds have yet to offer any solution to the legal, moral and logical paradoxes that their precognitive punishments would present. Yet the tribal anxieties that such repeated fear-mongering taps into are being used to justify an unprecedented assault on personal liberty.

If no crime, as we have come to understand the term, has actually been committed, is the feeling of social maladjustment now itself a criminal act?

THE WAR AGAINST DRUGS

Throughout history the suppression of psychological diversity has been a favoured preoccupation of puritanical ideologies. The classification and social management of both drug use and mental illness could be seen to be the twenty first century continuation of that history. The correlation between ideologies of this kind and the institutional expression of sadistic control fantasies should perhaps be borne in mind.

In a recent column for the *Sunday Times*, Melanie Phillips voiced her moral alarm at the widespread use of drugs, her tone bordering on the hysterical:

Ecstasy cocaine and cannabis are an intrinsic part of the club scene. Why aren't police raiding all such places every night? It's as if grievous bodily harm had got out of control and people were urging the legalisation of assault ...

No doubt Ms. Phillips has little time for the notion that who puts what inside his or her own body could, in fact, be no-one else's business.

In the name of public safety, and at enormous public expense, a war against drugs has been unilaterally declared. More precisely, this war is being waged against that same public's autonomous use of drugs without the consent of medical practitioners. The growth in the routine drug screening of employees by large corporations seems grossly inefficient, morally questionable and probably futile. Contrary to mythology, the overwhelming majority of drug users are perfectly functional and unnoticed. However, even if an employee's performance is entirely unimpaired by drug use, he or she faces dismissal on the grounds of simply being, or having been, a drug user.

A WAR AGAINST STATES OF MIND

That such intrusive and expensive screening practices continue to spread suggests another, unacknowledged, war is quietly being waged, not on an individual's actions, but on his or her *states of mind*. Consider Gary Glitter's recent conviction (and subsequent pantomime of apology) for downloading pornographic images from the Internet. Regardless of how one might view the rock star's taste in turn-ons, solitary masturbation does not, to my knowledge, cause injury to others.