

EDITORIAL

It is not by calculation that this issue's research papers are considerably longer than usual. Each addresses a major issue that would be poorly served by anything resembling a research note. Peter Earl is one of a dozen or so heterodox economists who wrote to the Queen recently. In a reckless moment, she had asked why no one had foreseen the recession. Some 22 mainstream economists responded in February, urging her to demand monthly accounts from her ministers, not a course she has been anxious to take. Earl and his colleagues then wrote their collective letter, informing Her Majesty that the mainstream economists had rather missed the point, which tempted at least one columnist to risk the old joke about laying economists end to end (Keegan, 2010, p.46). Earl *et al.* observed that economists, rather than the Queen, might have done more to prevent the developed world sinking into its current financial mess. Here, Earl justifies this observation. History does not relate whether the Queen ever replied to either camp. She may not read letters from economists. She may, though, read *Prometheus*.

Ruth Williams and Darryl Doessel tackle a complicated issue. Compared with the attention paid to our physical health, we show scant regard for our mental health. It suffers. The DSM-III taxonomy of mental illness is an important innovation, helping us come to grips with the problem. But the adoption and diffusion of the innovation has been accompanied by a growing tendency to medicalise. Should we not accept that a degree of temporary unhappiness is normal and inevitable? Perhaps, but what degree short of delirious delight is acceptable? Public policy requires an answer.

Thierry Rayna and Ludmila Striukova do what academics should do — they challenge the outpourings of interest groups. The informal coalition of interest groups that is the internet deserves to be challenged. So much information is available that the cost of using any of it is becoming prohibitive. Rayna and Striukova find that the customary focus on the supply side is unhelpful. They look to a demand-driven system to solve the problem of using high quality information from the internet.

And then we have a most unusual paper: Felicity Wood compares modern management with the occult practices of darkest Africa. This is no cheap jibe: this is serious. She carefully disentangles the web of truths, half-truths and nonsense that comprise the beliefs of the West's management, and finds them disturbingly similar to those that underlie some African spirituality. She is then able to apply a new literature to the understanding of modern management behaviour. Suck the lifeblood out of the manager and what is left but a zombie?

The debate in this issue, organised by the indefatigable Jo Maltby, one of our *Prometheus* editors, was supposed to have been on the problem of providing scientific advice to government. David Nutt has kindly provided the proposition paper. The Home Secretary dismissed David Nutt from his position as chairman of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs in October 2009 for providing the wrong advice. His paper focuses on the advice itself. To be sure, cannabis and other illegal drugs do harm, but loads of things do harm. What *relative* harm do these drugs do? David Nutt

then reflects on why government policy does not take scientific advice in this area seriously, and why it would much rather make selective use of the advice it receives from scientists to justify what it does for other reasons altogether.

With gusto the respondents compare the harm caused by illegal drugs, and especially heroin, with the harm caused by alcohol. Neil McKeganey, while noting that relative rather than absolute harm should be the issue, examines the moral dimension. As a society, we believe that certain things are right, and certain things wrong: drug laws and regulations are but one aspect of our attempts to encourage the former and discourage the latter. The views of both scientists and politicians will be coloured by their moral stance. Failure to acknowledge this does nothing to enhance the debate.

Ian Gilmore leaves us with the indelible image of doctors high on heroin struggling to tackle the problem of alcohol abuse. It is but an accident of history that heroin is illegal and alcohol legal, though interest groups have exploited the situation by emphasising the divide. Progress lies in closing the gap by accepting that alcohol is a drug. Ewan Hoyle would close the gap by moving the legal status of heroin much nearer to that of alcohol. He points out that it is the poor and disadvantaged who feel the heavy hand of the law – not Ian Gilmore’s doctors – and that society’s efforts to deter the unrighteous are hopelessly ineffective. What, then, is their point?

Ewan Hoyle is a member of the Liberal Democrats, a party which has not shied away from this issue. We did, of course, invite prominent individuals from the civil service, from government agencies and quangos, and from the Labour and Conservative parties. None wanted to express a personal opinion, though someone saw fit to leak David Nutt’s paper to the *Daily Mirror* (Roberts, 2010). The disinclination to risk saying anything other than the politically acceptable, and the inclination to make political capital out of those who do, are graphic evidence of the problem inherent in telling politicians what they do not want to know. Also leaked has been the preliminary list of public bodies and quangos the coalition government intends chopping. Does the new minister for the Cabinet Office appreciate that there might be better ways of providing government with scientific advice?

‘Cabinet Office has been working with the Chief Scientist and Government Office for Science and other departmental colleagues to identify whether there are more accountable and effective ways to secure the delivery of independent, high quality scientific advice to government.’ (Maude, 2010)

The Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs survives.

References

- Keegan, W. (2010) ‘Economists’ bright idea of a round robin left us in the dark’, *Observer*, 14 March.
- Maude, F. (2010) ‘Public bodies reform — clearance from Home Affairs Committee’, letter to Nick Clegg, 26 August.
- Roberts, B. (2010) ‘David Cameron could be the man to de-criminalise cannabis’ *Daily Mirror*, 10 July.