

# “THE NUTTY PROFESSOR?”

Professor David Nutt was working for the Labour government when he was forced to resign for his contentious views on drugs. Ten years on, we catch up with him.

## 10YRS

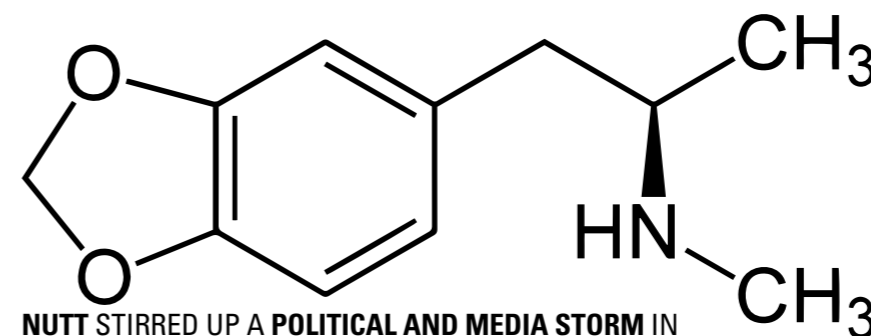
“EVEN AS A RECREATIONAL DRUG [CANNABIS] IS WIDELY USED, AND I AM SURE IT WILL BECOME LEGAL IN BRITAIN WITHIN 10 YEARS,” SAYS NUTT. “I SEE MANY OTHER DRUGS GOING THAT WAY. I THINK IN 100 YEARS’ TIME PEOPLE WILL LOOK BACK AND WONDER WHAT ALL THE FUSS WAS ABOUT.”

Few scientists get to make public announcements on their specialisms, and of those who do, not many will have generated so many column inches in the nation’s press as Professor David Nutt.

As a member then head of the government’s Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD) Nutt stirred up a political and media storm in 2007 when he pointed out that, statistically speaking, horse riding was more dangerous than taking ecstasy. That tempest eventually died down, but another blew up in 2009 when he wrote a paper and gave a lecture that argued that drug classification should be based on the evidence of the harm caused. In this scheme of things, alcohol and tobacco ranked higher than LSD, ecstasy and cannabis. Indeed, alcohol was behind only cocaine, heroin, barbiturates and methadone. Cannabis came a lowly tenth. Nutt also said that smoking cannabis carried a “relatively small risk” of psychotic illness.

The outrage was loud. The *Daily Mail* called him “dangerous,” *The Sun* dubbed him the “Natty professor”. For Alan Johnson, Home Secretary at the time, it was all too much. Nutt’s resignation was the price. “He was asked to go because he cannot be both a government advisor and a campaigner against government policy,” wrote Johnson. “As for his comments about horse riding being more dangerous than ecstasy... it is of course a political rather than a scientific point.”

Questioning Nutt’s scientific authority didn’t go well for Johnson, not when Nutt’s career had at that point taken in the Universities of Cambridge, Oxford and Bristol, Imperial College, Guy’s Hospital and the US National Institutes of Health. Across all those institutions Nutt’s unflinching “rational, evidence-based approach” had served him well, and he wasn’t about to change it to appease anybody, not even the Home Secretary. “When I heard myself trying to defend



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the government’s position, I realised I just couldn’t,” says Nutt today. “It was untenable. I had to say what I said to maintain my credibility as a scientist, because once I lost that I would become an apologist. I gained a reputation, but I don’t regret it.”

Might just a little more political savvy have preserved his influence at the heart of government? “That is still an open question, though I think the answer is that I probably couldn’t have changed things, because my experience during the 10 years I worked with the ACMD, was that politicians are only interested in hearing what they want to hear... in the end they would always rather go with the *Daily Mail*.”

“The internet was really taking off at this point so the right of reply was there. I managed to engage an army of sympathisers and was able to bring the debate right out into the open. A lot of people were on my side, and it actually became a fair fight.”

Ten years later, it’s not an experience he’d care to repeat. “I was younger then. It required a huge amount of effort, writing and talking on the phone day and night. It was physically and emotionally demanding. But in the end I think it changed things, because it became such a public debate. Some people thought I was an idiot, but when they heard the arguments they changed their minds.”

After leaving the ACMD, Nutt set up the

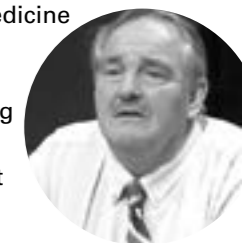
Independent Scientific Committee on Drugs, so that he and his colleagues could still bring the scientific evidence to bear on drug policy around the world.

He also remains head of the neuropsychopharmacology unit at Imperial College, where he continues to study the effects of drugs on the brain. “My particular expertise is in giving drugs to patients and volunteers, then measuring what is going on in their brains. The brain is a chemical machine, and drugs are a way of probing what’s going on. I have a couple of major research interests at present. In addiction we are exploring new treatments on the basis of brain chemistry abnormality, focusing on the dopamine and endorphin systems. And in depression we are developing a new approach using psychedelic drugs.”

He is also still fighting for medical cannabis to become available. “Hundreds of thousands of people in this country are being forced to break the law. I really want to see an open market for medical cannabis in this country. It would help a lot of people with intractable disorders. It would also help people who are on the wrong medicine, such as opioids. You can’t overdose on cannabis, it’s not as addictive. There are all sorts of benefits.”

## PROFESSOR DAVID NUTT

- ✓ 1972 – graduated in medicine from Downing College, Cambridge
- ✓ 1975 – competed training at Guy’s Hospital
- ✓ 1978 – Clinical Scientist at Radcliffe Infirmary
- ✓ 1983 – lecturing in psychiatry at Oxford University
- ✓ 1988 – set up the Psychopharmacology Unit at Bristol University
- ✓ 2008 – Professor of neuropsychopharmacology at Imperial College, London.



The ground is already shifting – back in October the home secretary Sajid Javid announced he was changing the Misuse of Drugs Act to allow doctors to prescribe medicine derived from cannabis.

“Even as a recreational drug [cannabis] is widely used, and I am sure it will become legal in Britain within 10 years,” says Nutt. “I see many other drugs going that way. I think in 100 years’ time people will look back and wonder what all the fuss was about.”

Likewise, he’s keen to see the use of psilocybin, or magic mushrooms, in treating psychiatric disorders and even pain. But perhaps his biggest ambition is to produce a safer substitute for alcohol. “I’m working on a synthetic alternative. It’s alcohol without all the physical and chemical drawbacks. Modern science allows us to get around those and produce something that is safer and will revolutionise our relationship with drinking – all the pleasure and none of the pain!” And if he succeeds, he’ll be back in the headlines yet again.

