

The negative ramifications of random drug tests at schools far outweigh the benefits, writes **Stephen Vines**

The thin edge

Governments are most terrifying when panicked into action and blind to citizen's rights as they plunge ahead with little regard for the longer term damage they inflict. The recent decision to implement so-called random voluntary drug testing for schoolchildren is an almost classic example of this, and it is shocking to see that even normally vigilant legislators appear not to have noticed the extent of the government's folly.

Fortunately the privacy commissioner, Roderick Woo Bun, was not asleep at the wheel and has pointed out serious problems over a proposal to give parents and guardians the right to consent to urine testing of minors. Were this to happen, the government would find itself going beyond the law.

This may appear to be a rather pedantic response to the government's plan but it neatly illustrates the quandaries that arise when the state tries to droogoon an entire section of the population into solving a problem that only affects a minority and does so with scant acknowledgement of the rights of either the majority or the minority. Moreover the question of consent becomes even more insidious when those withholding permission to test are liable to fall under suspicion merely because they are asserting their rights.

Even if we set aside a body of international evidence suggesting that drug testing of this kind is ineffective, there remains the question of why the government acted with uncharacteristic speed to try and solve a problem which, in truth, has no easy-made solution. In this case, the rallying call came from the very top, with the chief executive declaring that he would respond decisively and lead the campaign.

Maybe the spur to action came from a growing number of media reports about teenage drug abuse and a recent high-profile case where teenagers were detained in Shenzhen on suspicion of drug possession. Yet the media runs all manner of stories about problems in society which elicit a far more tardy response. No one has explained



Drug testing in schools carries an assumption of guilt until innocence is proved, thus turning our legal system on its head

why this is a greater priority than, say, the problem of schoolchildren who cannot afford to continue their education. Then there are those who remain at school but have parents struggling to pay for books.

Are drugs a greater problem than the poverty-related issues which cause an alarmingly high death rate among older people? Or is the youth drug problem simply an issue where moral outrage and a misreading of the situation combine to persuade the bureaucrats that they have finally found something they can tackle with public support and at minimal cost?

None of this should be taken to suggest that drugs in schools are not a serious problem nor does it ignore that drug taking. However, by using a blunderbuss directed at school students the government seems to think it is aiming at a soft target and can achieve quick results.

The reality is quite different. Many children will experiment with drugs and

never become addicts, much in the way that they experiment with other seemingly exciting yet illicit activities. Indeed there is something to be said for ensuring that children get this sort of thing out of their system so that they can continue their lives without taking these risks.

But when the government, embarking on what looks like a moral crusade, sets out to criminalise large numbers of young people and makes the sordid business of drug taking glamorous by stamping the heavy hand of the state all over the place, the results are unlikely to be positive. This is the pragmatic side of the argument, which should not overshadow the alarm that needs to be raised over a government that seems blind to the fundamental rights of its citizens, however young.

Widespread drug testing in schools carries an assumption of guilt until innocence is proved, thus turning the foundation of Hong Kong's legal system on its head. Officials blather about how the "innocent" have nothing to fear from tests but the same rampant nonsense could be argued about, say shoppers who do not think about stores but could be subject to random searches in a regime which suspects all citizens of wrongdoing. Make no mistake: this is the thin end of the wedge.

Stephen Vines is a Hong Kong-based journalist and entrepreneur

Other voices

A right to schooling, but not to education

Swaminathan S. Anklesaria Aiyar

India has just enacted a Right to Education Act, guaranteeing every child in the six to 14 age group the right to free, compulsory education. The new law is essentially socialist: it seeks to ensure that, as far as possible, state governments provide free government schooling to all children. But it also obliges private schools to reserve a quarter of their seats for poor and low-caste children. This could, almost by accident, create the biggest school choice programme in the world, covering 30 million children.

The new law has several flaws. Government teachers cannot be fired, one reason why teacher absenteeism in government schools is chronically high. In one survey by a Harvard economist, a quarter of government teachers were absent on any given day, and only half were teaching. The law does not address teacher accountability. Teacher unions are too powerful, so politicians dare not discipline them.

Currently, millions of children complete school without being able to read simple paragraphs or do simple sums. Yet the act talks only of access to schools. It is concerned wholly with educational inputs, not outcomes. It provides a right to schooling, but not to education.

Children from richer families perform better because they get private tuition in the evenings, sometimes from the very teacher who was absent at school in the morning. The new law prohibits government teachers from giving private tuition. This is supposed to induce them to take teaching in school more seriously. Alas, teachers will break this rule with impunity.

The law mandates quality standards and official certification for all private schools, but none for government schools. Government teachers are armed with the appropriate degrees, while many private school teachers are not.

Yet, in the absence of motivation or accountability, teaching in government schools is so pathetic that many poor parents in urban slums send their children to free-charging private schools rather than free government schools. Often these private slum schools are of low quality, yet poor people find government schools worse.

The new law says all private schools must reserve a quarter of their seats for first grade onwards for neighbourhood children from socially and educationally disadvantaged classes – lower Hindu castes and poor people, who are well over half the population. For these children, the government will reimburse private schools.

This will not be the standard voucher system found in other countries. Indeed, many politicians hate the very word "voucher", and view the 25 per cent reservation as a way of hammering elite schools rather than empowering students through school choice.

Elite private schools fear the system will impose a huge and unwarranted tax on them because the voucher will not cover their actual costs. They will probably appeal to the courts against the new law's reimbursement provisions, and it remains to be seen what view the courts take.

The author is a research fellow at The Cato Institute's Centre for Global Liberty and Prosperity

Words without action only sanction junta

Gordon Brown

The appalling but inevitable outcome of Aung San Suu Kyi's sham trial is final proof that the military regime in Burma is determined to continue defying the world.

Depressing news that she has been sentenced to up to 18 months' further house arrest is not only a tragedy for her and her family but also for the Burmese people who suffer daily at the hand of tyranny.

This was the moment for the generals to embrace the growing clamour for change and choose the path of reform demanded by the region and the global community.

They comprehensively shunned it. The charges were baseless, the verdict outrageous. The international community must respond to this latest injustice with a clear message to the junta that its tyrannical actions will no longer be tolerated.

Further sanctions to target directly the regime's economic interests have been agreed by the European Union in response to the verdict and must be implemented as quickly as possible. Determined action in the UN Security Council must follow. Nothing less than a worldwide ban on the sale of arms to the regime will do as a first step.

I also believe that we should identify and target those judges complicit in these political show trials, which are an absurd mockery of justice.

The generals should be in no doubt about the strength of international solidarity with the cause of freedom, democracy and development in Burma.

Political and humanitarian conditions in the country continue to deter-

iorate. The media is assembled, freedom of speech and assembly are non-existent and the number of political prisoners – jailed only for their unwavering commitment to peace and national reconciliation – has doubled to more than 2,000.

Ms Suu Kyi is the most high-profile of them. She has long been a symbol of hope and defiance during her 14 years as a prisoner of conscience.

The facade of her prosecution is made more monstrous, therefore,

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because its real objective is to sever her bond with the people for whom she is a beacon of hope and resistance.

Her treatment can only be read as the junta's reluctance to move towards freedom, democracy and rule of law with Ms Suu Kyi a central figure in a new Burma.

So unless they immediately free her – and all political prisoners – and start genuine dialogue with opposition and ethnic groups, elections next year will have no credibility.

In July, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon demanded such measures on a visit to Rangoon. With this verdict, the generals have publicly snubbed him. Now comes our greatest test.

In the face of this arrogance, we

cannot stand by and effectively sanction the abhorrent actions of a violent, repressive junta – but show them the world community is united and co-ordinated in its response.

We have seen an extraordinary consensus building around the world against the Burmese regime, encompassing the UN, the EU, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and more than 45 heads of state. All of us must continue to push for genuine political reconciliation and change, especially those countries in the region of the greatest influence.

Burma is rich in natural and human resources and sits at the heart of a dynamic continent. Democratic reform would unleash the country's enormous potential. But the generals are condemning the country and its people to ever deeper isolation, poverty, conflict and despair.

Some may question why Burma warrants so much attention. There are other countries where human rights are ignored or people live in poverty. The Burmese regime stands virtually alone in the scale of its misrule and the sheer indifference to the suffering of its 50 million people.

Once again my thoughts are with Ms Suu Kyi – the human face of Burma's tragedy. But words and thoughts are no longer enough.

Gordon Brown is prime minister of the United Kingdom

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One man's meat

There are usually only two reasons why people quit smoking: health and politics. A doctor or spouse can have strong influence on even the most avowed smoker. Both can also be behind meat eaters turning to vegetarianism, but there can be many other causes for steaks to be pushed aside in favour of tofu and sprouts. I re-encountered an extremely persuasive one this week.

During internet research I chanced upon the Food and Agriculture Organisation's landmark 2006 report, *Livestock's Long Shadow*. The UN agency published it largely in response to concerns about the impact to the global food cycle and environment of the increasing wealth of China and other developing nations. Affluence equates with being able to afford to eat more meat. Assessing circumstances was a necessary starting point to making projections and determining risk.

The report did that and more. Its pages are filled with chilling facts and figures. In 2006, the world's resources were being strained by meat demand. Continued consumption levels and the predicted desire of hundreds of millions more people in China and India for a regular taste could mean environmental catastrophe. Keep in mind that the FAO is not an organisation dedicated to vegetarianism. Its objective is to ensure that the world's people have enough to eat. Diets need to be balanced, but neither livestock nor poultry raising nor crop nor fruit production is favoured. Preventing hunger is its overarching concern.

Regardless, the headline statistics alone make clear that too much meat production is not good for Planet Earth. For starters, the livestock industry uses 70 per cent of agricultural land. It saps up 8 per cent of global water resources, mostly for growing feed, and is believed to be the biggest single source of pollution of waterways. Those of us worried about greenhouse gas emissions can point to it as being responsible for 18 per cent of carbon dioxide – more than for transport – and 37 per cent of methane, which is more than 20 times as potent as carbon dioxide in its warming effect. There is much more, such as rainforest and habitat destruction, but there is only so much distressing news that can be taken in one day. Yes, and these figures are three years old – developing world demand is rising by the second.

My getting acquainted with the report had the same effect it did the first time I read it: I have taken another resolute step down the road to becoming a 100 per cent vegetarian. That process began when I came to Hong Kong to work in 1988. My rural Australian upbringing of steak and eggs for breakfast backed by meat at every other meal had to be substantially modified when I encountered what I determined to be staggering beef prices. Scars involving chemically tainted pork and seafood and bird flu have over time put paid to my occasional foray into late encounters with pork, fish and chicken. The older I get, the less meat my body craves. I was down to being a vegetarian two days a week when I first read the FAO report in 2006; its cold facts made me vow to aim for three or four.

Vegetarianism is my choice for a number of reasons. Religion, the thought of consuming a fellow mammal and a desire to lose weight are among them. A friend who grew up on a movie diet that started with *Bambi* and progressed through *Babe*, *Chicken Run* and *Finding Nemo* was also naturally turned down the veggie route. Another appears to have done so purely for financial reasons: Vegetables and fruit cost less than meat and fish. But perhaps the most salient reason of them all for at least becoming a part-time vegetarian lies in the FAO report.

I do not yet equate eating meat with smoking. There is no doubt, though, that it is becoming an increasingly political issue. Just as I gave up smoking at the age of 20 because a girlfriend complained of the smell, I can foresee the day I will feel that crossing the threshold of a steakhouse is a crime. In the meantime, I will work towards four or five days of vegetarianism a week and recommend that those who insist on meat at every meal take a look at www.fao.org/docrep/010/a0701e/a0701e00.htm.

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Seedy Silvio a victim of his own success

Arnold Cassola

Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's political and sexual exploits make headlines around the world, and not just in the tabloid press. These stories would be no more than funny – which they certainly are – if they were not so damaging to Italy and revelatory of the country's immobile politics.

For, despite the rampant scandals, "National Silvio" remains by far Italy's most popular and successful politician, though his approval ratings have now dipped below the 50 per cent mark in opinion polls for the first time since his second return to the premiership last year.

Part of the reason for Mr Berlusconi's longevity, despite his many stumbles, is cultural. As in other Latin or Mediterranean countries with a strong Catholic tradition, Italian society long ago learned to accept serenely a life of duplicity on the one hand, a strong attachment to church and family values and on the other a second life – often lived in plain sight – composed of mistresses and other "dubious" connections.

Italian society's tacit acceptance of such behaviour has become more openly acknowledged in recent years, thanks perhaps to Mr Berlusconi and his vast media holdings. In the 1970s, the average Italian working-class family's major ambition for its children was for them to study, go to university and become a doctor or a lawyer.

Since the late 1970s, and especially during the 1980s and 1990s, Mr Berlusconi's three private TV channels have portrayed a false and illusory model of quick success,

as seen in US soap operas such as *Dallas*. Since the 1990s, his channels broadcast *Big Brother* and Italian variety shows dominated by male comedians, musclemen and scantily clad young women, popularity known to all.

In the space of just 30 years, Mr Berlusconi's TV stations managed to impose this illustrious portrait of success on Italian society.

Graduating as a doctor or a lawyer is no longer a mark of success and hair. Mr Berlusconi is the embodiment of this form of success. He became a doctor or a lawyer is no longer a mark of success and hair. Mr Berlusconi is the embodiment of this form of success. He became one of the richest businessmen in the world has also become Italy's most powerful politician – one of the world's most colourful.

Until a few weeks ago, the average Italian viewed him as a role model, someone who had succeeded in many spheres of life.

That has now changed. People have become less admiring of Mr Berlusconi because the hypocrisy has gone too far. They are trendy for an Italian politician to flaunt his Mediterranean macho image, but that image becomes hard to stomach when the prime minister launches a campaign to eradicate street prostitution, with possible jail sentences for clients, while sleeping with paid escorts.

Today, it seems all but certain that Mr Berlusconi will never be elected president of Italy, the post to which he has always aspired.

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