

New rules on paedophiles

## **The enforcer bows out**

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### **Tough talk but measured action to curb sex offenders who target children**

WHEN John Reid took over the job of home secretary in May 2006, it was in the wake of two damaging scandals involving sex offenders. His predecessor, Charles Clarke, had been sacked after it emerged that on his watch foreign criminals, including some convicted for sexual crimes, had been released instead of deported after finishing their prison sentences. A few months earlier Ruth Kelly, then education secretary, had faced criticism when it transpired that more than 150 individuals on the sex offenders' register had been cleared to work with children.

Mr Reid wasted no time making political capital. He declared himself "The Enforcer", and gave the impression he thought chemically castrating paedophiles was a fine idea. Then he sent an adviser to America to examine "Megan's Law", under which local people are informed if a known sex offender moves into their area, and gave the impression that he was keen on introducing something similar in Britain. And just a few weeks into his new job, he announced a review of the systems that are meant to protect children from unknown sex offenders.

Since then, fear of paedophilia has become even more rife: the disappearance in May, as yet unexplained, of three-year-old Madeleine McCann from a hotel in Portugal has kept it in the public eye. So when Mr Reid's review was published on June 13th, days before he is to return to the backbenches, headlines were guaranteed.

Despite a long-running campaign by the *News of the World*, Britain's bestselling newspaper, Britain is not to get a Megan's Law; Mr Reid has become convinced that by driving paedophiles underground it would endanger more children than it protected. But more people will be entitled to get information from the sex offenders' register. As the

law stands, only employers can find out whether a named individual is on that list; now that right is to be extended to anyone who wants to check on a person who will have "regular, unsupervised access" to their child—perhaps a single mother's new boyfriend, or just a friendly neighbourhood guy who has set up a Meccano club for youngsters.

The most eye-catching headlines referred to plans to give testosterone suppressants to more sex offenders—chemical castration, as it is more crudely termed. "Fiends to get chop," screamed the *Sun*, a tabloid newspaper.

Karen Harrison, a lecturer at the University of the West of England who has reviewed the evidence on this hormone therapy, deplores the language. Still, she says, the policy is sound. Paedophiles who experience frequent, intrusive thoughts about sex with children can benefit from drugs that suppress their sex hormones—and with luck their deviant fantasies too.

There have been calls to make such drug treatment compulsory, but that would be a huge mistake, explains Ray Wyre, a consultant and expert witness on sex crime. "It only works for a few offenders—you don't want to use it for those who also experience sexual arousal in relation to adults, because you want to enhance that feeling, not suppress it. And it must be entirely voluntary, otherwise you could cause violent offenders to become enraged and even more dangerous."

One of the proposed measures is expected to become compulsory, however: the use of polygraphs, more commonly known as lie detectors, to monitor sex offenders on probation. Despite the machines' poor accuracy—typically, they wrongly identify 10-20% of yes-no answers as lies or truth—they do seem to have benefits when used as part of a package of support and treatment for sex offenders.

Many paedophiles are unwilling to face the truth about themselves and hence to state it, says Don Grubin, a professor of forensic psychiatry at Newcastle University who has carried out trials for the Home Office. The machines seem to help them do so. Around 70% of men regularly questioned with polygraphs disclosed information that their probation officer thought important to their treatment, against 15% of those in a control group. A third of the disclosures suggested the offender posed a greater risk to children than had been supposed.

Mr Grubin illustrates the usefulness of polygraphs by telling what in this line of business counts as a success story. "One man disclosed he had a girlfriend, which his probation officer hadn't known. The officer visited the girlfriend. It turned out she was a single mother, he had been helping her to decorate her living room—and stripping down to his underwear to do so in order to avoid paint splashes on his clothes." The man was sent back to jail.