Feisty Western Cape Premier Helen Zille saw out 2011 in a firestorm of protest over pilot and planned provincial lotteries offering potential cash prizes to anyone who tested for HIV and (negative for) drug abuse, claiming ‘persuasion’ had so far proven to be a blunt instrument.

The fuse to a series of rhetorical explosions by respondents as varied as the public sector committee of the South African Medical Association (SAMA), the Treatment Action Campaign (aka Section 27), and various topical HIV pandemic authors was lit by a keynote speech Zille gave at her health department’s first-ever Wellness Summit in early November. Fuel was added to the fire by several incorrect reports of her address (including that she intended refusing ARVs to HIV-positive men who had sex without condoms or telling their partners). However, it was incentivised testing and South Africans’ bedroom behaviour that injected what one celebrated HIV/AIDS author, Helen Epstein, described as ‘hopeful openness’ into the ongoing local AIDS prevention debate.

Zille claims South Africa is in the grip of a new AIDS denialism that can only be addressed by confronting the ‘root causes’ of the HIV pandemic: the culture of multiple concurrent sexual partners and inter-generational sex that creates an ‘AIDS super-highway’. She’s also calling for HIV-positive individuals who knowingly have sex with one or more partners without disclosing their status to be criminally charged. Her administration will investigate ways of requiring people to know their status, she says. Until individuals took their responsibility as seriously as her government, which provided ‘one of the most advanced free treatment and condom distribution systems in the world’, South Africa could not beat HIV/AIDS. To address this abrogation of personal responsibility, her government was adapting cutting-edge behaviour change strategies based on work by pioneering experts from Duke and Harvard universities.

Zille told journalists that until November last year persuasion had met with very limited success in getting people to test for HIV, while with teenagers, both persuasion and ‘reality check’ or scare tactics (showing the devastating effect of drugs) had failed to have the required impact.

Critics ‘chew’ furiously on Zille’s HIV/drug-testing ‘carrots’
alcohol-free testing lottery aimed at school-going teenagers (still in the pipeline at the time of writing).

The former offered Cape Metropole residents a chance at a R50 000 first prize and five runners-up R10 000 each for taking an HIV test at specific provincial health sites, with winners’ names released by consent and proper test counselling provided. The latter, due this year, intends to offer school pupils a monthly chance at winning major shopping voucher prizes, provided they rack up an 85% attendance at the growing network of extracurricular Mass Opportunity Development (MOD) centres across the Cape Metropole over six months – and test drug/alcohol free. The MOD centres are intended to offer an alternative to the all-too prevalent after-school pursuits of drug taking and drinking, sex and violence that shatter communities, but until now have been shunned by those they are designed for.

‘Cutting edge’ behavioural economics

In her speech Zille said: ‘The point is to create a significant incentive to stay drug/alcohol free. It will be cheap at the price when you see what we spend on drug and alcohol rehabilitation (budget recently doubled to just under R70 million a year). We could use some of these funds for Wellness programmes rather than have these kids cause devastation to themselves, their families and communities’. Zille’s address to the Wellness Summit centred on the skewed context in which R2 billion is spent annually on HIV/AIDS as part of South Africa’s globally acknowledged prevention and treatment campaign while few people challenge a predominant sexual culture that helps drive the pandemic.

It was especially ‘ironic’ that people rejected the ‘nanny state’ when it asked them to behave responsibly, but ran to it when they couldn’t cope with the consequences of their behaviour.

‘How is it possible to claim that we are out of the denial of the Thabo Mbeki era when our current president’s behaviour exemplifies the AIDS superhighway and nobody says anything?’ The government’s role is to provide the AIDS superhighway and nobody says ‘compassion, urgency and pragmatism’. Epstein said the hypothesis of her book, which offered unemployed men R75 to test for HIV, had a 100% uptake in the group it targeted, along with a waiting list in the thousands. The Discovery Health/Sunday Times Right to Know campaign (July 2008 - June 2009) attracted 55 000 volunteers for testing, thanks to the promise of one person per month becoming R100 000 richer. Longer-term trials such as the three-year J-PAL immunisation intervention in rural India, met with similar success. Offering parents 1 kg of lentils and a set of metal meal plates upon completion of a course of immunisation for their child resulted in a more-than-doubled immunisation rate at half the cost, thanks to economies of scale resulting from increased uptake.

Whatever the outcome of the latest initiative, Zille, an award-winning former journalist and mayor of Cape Town, has single-handedly moved the locus of the HIV testing debate.