

A 'War' We Should Fight No Longer

Written by Drugtext Press Service
Thursday, 02 June 2011 11:44 -

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Mon, 30 May 2011

Independent (UK)

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Obama and Cameron Are Wrong. the Momentum Is Building for a More Rational Way of Dealing With This Problem

When Barack Obama and David Cameron wrote a joint opinion piece for The Times last week, their first sentence was: "Both of us came of age during the 1980s." Those of us of a similar age know what that

meant: an adolescence spent in a haze of post-punk, reggae, acid house and dope. Obama has admitted smoking cannabis and taking cocaine; Cameron refuses to confirm or deny that he inhaled anything, but the nod and the wink are hard to miss.

Before he was President, Obama called the war on drugs an "utter failure" and said we should think about decriminalising cannabis.

Before he was Prime Minister, Cameron said Britain's drug policy was an "abject failure" and called for a debate on legalisation of all drugs. Now that they're in power, though, both men have had an utter and abject failure of nerve. They agree with the former Prime Minister of Luxembourg, Jean-Claude Juncker, who once said, in this

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context: "We know what to do, but we don't know how to get re-elected once we have done it."

They are not just craven but wrong. For, inexorably, the momentum is building for a more rational way of dealing with drugs. And it's not only because baby-boomers and their successor generations now make up three-quarters of voters. The big hitters are onside too. This week, the Global Commission on Drug Policy will publish a report in New York calling for a "paradigm shift" in the way we deal with drugs. It will advocate not just decriminalisation, but also experiments with legalisation and regulation. Its cast list of backers is stellar.

Step forward former Presidents of Mexico, Colombia, Brazil and Switzerland; the former UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan; the former US Secretary of State, George Schultz; the former EU High Representative, Javier Solana; and - intriguingly - the current Prime Minister of Greece, George Papandreou. Other luminaries include Paul Volcker, ex-Chairman of the Fed, and Richard Branson (anyone for some Virgin Gold?).

In Britain too, former politicians and policy-makers are calling for change. The new All-Party Parliamentary Group on Drug Policy Reform, led by the redoubtable Baroness Meacher, has members who include a former Tory Chancellor, Lord Lawson; a former head of MI5, Baroness Manningham-Buller; and a former Director of Public Prosecutions, Lord Macdonald of River Glaven.

These are people who have tried to win the war on drugs and failed.

They see the explosive costs of prohibition and are prepared at least to contemplate the notion that the benefits of relaxation might be greater. Even Mike Trace, who used to be the UK's deputy drugs tsar, is on their side. He has written a paper for the Global Commission on Drug Policy explaining why the policies he followed haven't worked.

So politicians understand all this before they take office. They are prepared to admit it again after they leave office. But they are too scared to do anything about it when they're there. Why?

You might sum it up in three words: the Daily Mail. But you would be wrong. Even the Mail has

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been known to express rational views on drug policy. In 2000, after the Police Foundation published a report calling for the relaxation of drug laws, the Mail ran a thoughtful leader entitled "Britain needs a serious debate". The following day, The Daily Telegraph had a double-length leader arguing that "the Government should draw up plans to legalise cannabis both for its consumption and for its supply".

Social conservatives who disapprove of drug use can be persuaded that outright prohibition doesn't achieve the aim they seek. If the war on drugs simply needed more troops, then 20 to 30 Mexicans a day would not now be dying at the hands of drug gangs. All President Calderon's war on drugs has achieved is a level of violence that would shock even the most callous of snuff-movie addicts.

Cracking down doesn't help. There is no correlation between the strictness of a country's drug laws and its level of drug use. The US has some of the toughest laws but also one of the highest rates of drug consumption in the world. Portugal recently decriminalised all drugs and has seen neither an explosion in use nor a rush of drug tourists. None of the policies that governments have used in their war on drugs has succeeded. Trying to stop the drugs being grown at source merely moves them to another country. So the old golden triangle of opium production in Laos, Burma and Thailand has relocated to Afghanistan. When the Americans spent more than \$7 billion trying to eradicate cocaine-growing in Colombia, all they achieved was to shift production to Bolivia and Peru.

Maybe governments can squeeze the supply as it enters their countries and streets? Suppress the retail market and perhaps the drugs will become too expensive. The UK Government commissioned an economic analysis on this, and found that 60 to 80 per cent of drugs would have to be seized to make a real impact on price and availability.

The best it has ever achieved is around 20 per cent. When Australia once had such success in seizing heroin that it created a heroin shortage, all that happened was that use of cocaine and methamphetamine soared.

For the inescapable truth is that some people, particularly the young, will always be determined to take mind-altering substances.

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This happens in every culture and has happened in every period of history. It is quixotic to pretend that you can stop it. All you can do is try to minimise the harm that results.

And the evidence now is that the prohibition creates at least as much harm as the drugs do - if not more. Even the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, which is tasked with enforcing the UN Convention on drugs, admits that there are serious "unintended consequences". The illegal market in drugs enriches organised violent crime to the tune of \$300bn a year. Prohibition of moderate, recreational drug use turns otherwise law-abiding citizens into criminals. And we all suffer from politicians treating drug addiction as a criminal-justice rather than a health problem. Instead of addicts receiving treatment, they end up having to steal or deal in order to finance their habit. They commit half of all property crime in Britain and turn other people into junkies.

Meanwhile global drug law enforcement costs more than \$100 billion a year, at a time when all countries are trying to spend less. The consequences of criminalisation can be hideously socially divisive too. American coppers spend much more time enforcing drug laws in black neighbourhoods than white ones. As a result, black American men are 13 times more likely to be sent to jail on drug charges than white men, despite having the same rate of drug use. Here's an even more horrendous fact: more black Americans are now in jail or on probation or parole than were enslaved in 1850.

There must be a better way, and Obama and Cameron know it. If they're serious about representing a new generation, they should stop bragging about their youth and start doing something about it. Those of us who also came of age in the 1980s don't want to wait till they're ex-leaders serving on a drugs policy commission. Like George Papandreou, they should start telling truth from power now.