

[Top UK Officials: UN-inspired War on Drugs Failed](#)[| Print |](#)

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On the 50th anniversary of the [United Nations treaty](#) that led to the global “War on Drugs,” a group of prominent officials and legislators from the United Kingdom [declared the battle a failure and formed a commission](#) calling for new policies to deal with problems associated with drugs.

Among the heavyweights promoting changes in national drug laws are the former heads of the U.K. internal security agency MI5, the Crown Prosecution Service, the government news service BBC, the British Medical Association and even the General Medical Council. Top British legislators from various parties in Parliament and the House of Lords are involved too.

The newly created “[All-Party Parliamentary Group on Drug Policy Reform](#)” is calling for policies “based on scientific evidence.” Members [said](#) that despite governments pouring enormous sums of money into prohibition, availability and abuse of drugs have only increased. On top of that, the war has served to enrich terrorists and crime bosses while destabilizing entire countries like [Mexico](#).

The chairwoman of the group, Baroness Meacher, has already come out with strong statements against the current prohibition model. “Criminalizing drug users has been an expensive catastrophe for individuals and communities,” Meacher [told *The Daily Telegraph*](#) in an interview. “In the U.K. the time has come for a review of our 1971 Misuse of Drugs Act, [the law that criminalized drugs to comply with the [UN Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs](#) treaty].”

Meacher, who is also in charge of a National Health Service trust, called on the British government to heed the advice of current international experts at the UN itself in recognizing drug addiction as a health problem, not something to be punished. She also cited the model pursued by other European nations that have successfully experimented with different approaches.

“We have the example of other countries to follow. The best is Portugal which has decriminalized drug use for 10 years,” Meacher said. “Portugal still has one of the lowest drug addiction rates in Europe, the trend of young people’s drug addiction is falling in Portugal against an upward trend in the surrounding countries, and the Portuguese prison population has fallen over time.” A 2009 study by the D.C.-based Cato Institute [confirms](#) her assertions about the effects of drug policies implemented in Portugal.

Another former high-level U.K. official criticizing the current British system is Lord Lawson, the Chancellor of the Exchequer from 1983 to 1989. “I have no doubt that the present policy is a disaster,” he [told](#) the *Telegraph*. “This is an important issue, which I have thought about for many years. But I still don’t know what the right answer is — I have joined the [All-Party Parliamentary Group on Drug Policy Reform] in the hope that it may help us to find the right answer.”

Other Lords are taking up the discussion as well. In the House of Lords on March 9, a [debate](#) about setting up a Royal Commission to review drug policies revealed significant support for ending prohibition. Nearly every member who spoke advocated an end to the war on drugs.

“There are clearly appalling costs associated with drug use, not only to those who become addicted and their families but also to the community. However, there are clear problems with prohibition,” [explained](#) Lord Norton, a Conservative who kicked off the debate. “If drugs are illegal, the supply is therefore driven underground and supply becomes in the grip of organized and violent crime. What happened with [alcohol] prohibition in the United States, we see now repeated in respect of drugs and on a massive global scale. This has appalling consequences in some countries in terms of loss of life.”

In response to the statement by Lord Norton, Baroness Walmsley, a Liberal Democrat, [announced](#) her support. “I agree with him that policy should be evidence-based, as existing drugs policy is an expensive failure and based on ignorance and prejudice,” she said. “All evidence points to drugs being a health issue. Only bad policy has turned it into a criminal justice issue, a public safety issue and

an economic issue.... I believe that what an intelligent adult chooses to put into his own body should be up to him.”

More than half a dozen other Lords and Baronesses announced their support for the proposal and for decriminalization. Only one Lord said he disagreed with some aspects of decriminalization, and even he conceded that there were big problems with the current approach to drugs.

And the British government already seems to be pursuing somewhat of a new policy in dealing with the problem. For example, Justice Secretary Ken Clarke [announced](#) plans to turn toward a strategy that would help drug users get clean instead of keeping them in jail.

The sudden change of heart, however, has been recent and dramatic. In late 2009, *The New American* [reported](#) that U.K. “Drug Czar” David Nutt was fired for making assertions that flew in the face of the drug war. He claimed marijuana, ecstasy and LSD were in fact less dangerous than alcohol and tobacco. And while stopping short of directly advocating legalization, Professor Nutt attracted the ire of government after refusing to back down from his positions.

“My view is policy should be based on evidence,” he [said](#) after being urged to recant. “It’s a bit odd to make policy that goes in the face of evidence. The danger is they are misleading us. The scientific evidence is there: it’s in all the reports we published.”

After reviewing evidence and the effects of current policies, the new parliamentary drug-policy group will eventually come up with proposals for changes to the existing system. Analysts [expect](#) suggestions such as the decriminalization of drugs or at least ending jail sentences for minor offenders.

The group is working with the [Beckley Foundation](#) to study the issues. “After 50 years [since the UN treaty] it is obvious that the War on Drugs has failed,” the organization and members of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Drug Policy Reform [noted in a letter](#) to the U.K. *Times*. “Criminals and paramilitaries benefited from drug crime to the tune of \$320 billion in 2009.”

Among the objectives being pursued are the promotion of health-oriented policies on drugs, the reform of UN drug treaties and more. “Fifty years on, it is time for change,” the letter stated.

Media outlets suggested that the proposals could be well received by the government. “[The group’s] intervention could receive a sympathetic audience in Whitehall, where ministers and civil servants are trying to cut the numbers and cost of the prison population,” [noted](#) Martin Beckford for the *Telegraph*.

And the cost of the war is exactly what some analysts think the effort is all about. “Bankruptcy has a way of concentrating minds, and Britain is near bankruptcy,” [noted](#) a report from the free-market oriented *Daily Bell*. “One would like to be charitable and offer up the notion that British political elites have suddenly — because it is rational — discovered that the war on drugs is illegitimate and counterproductive; but, no, the timing is too suspicious.... The sudden reasonableness of the British establishment as regards the war on drugs surely has to do with financial calculations.”

Of course, it isn’t just the U.K. that is seeking alternative solutions to drug problems. A group of lawmakers in Australia, for example, is also [urging](#) the government to end the war on drugs in that country, calling it a failure that is even less likely to work in the future. Their proposal would legalize heroin, cocaine, and other drugs considered to be among the worst. In the Czech Republic, drugs — including heroin — [were decriminalized](#) in 2010.

Even in the United States certain states have started to [defy the federal government’s dictates](#) — implemented in response to UN treaties — dealing with drugs. Around a dozen states, for example, have already [approved](#) medical-marijuana legislation in direct opposition to federal statutes. And many analysts, including those at the *Daily Bell*, [predict](#) that when the dollar [loses its stature as the world reserve currency](#), the war could come to an end in America, too.