

Peter Hitchens: Drug decriminalisation doesn't work - just ask the Portuguese and the Dutch

Peter Hitchens

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One of the great myths of our age is the Portuguese Drug Paradise — the claim that by giving up laws against drug abuse, that ancient nation has achieved a modern miracle of relaxed civilisation. Now that myth lies crumpled in the dustbin, destroyed by — of all people — the liberal Washington Post newspaper.

Never again will I be asked by a drug legaliser or a BBC presenter: 'What about Portugal?'

Or at least, not if they have any sense. For on July 7, under the headline 'Once hailed for decriminalising drugs, Portugal is now having doubts', the Post explored modern-day Porto, the country's second city. It described a dismal scene, just such as drug opponents would have predicted: 'Addiction haunts the recesses of this ancient port city, as people with gaunt, clumsy hands lift crack pipes to lips, syringes to veins', wrote Anthony Faiola and Catarina Fernandes Martins.

In a long article illustrated with dispiriting pictures of drug-related squalor on the streets, they described how 'authorities are sealing off warren-like alleyways with iron bars and fencing in parks to halt the spread of encampments.

A siege mentality is taking root in nearby enclaves of pricey condos and multimillion-euro homes'. They added 'police are blaming a spike in the number of people who use drugs for a rise in crime'.

Well, this is not a surprise at all to most people with common sense. Drug abuse feeds crime, crime feeds drug abuse, and the only free countries in the world where this grim spiral is not destroying lives and happiness are Japan and South Korea. There, laws against possession of drugs are still enforced, and social disapproval of drug abuse remains strong — as was the case here in Britain before the 1960s revolution.

But somehow their comparative success does not attract much international attention. I am all agog to see what the House of Commons Home Affairs Committee will say about this when they report on drugs shortly, for the third time this century. I wonder how they will cope with the Washington Post's description of how 'the return in force of visible urban drug use... is leading the mayor [of

Porto] and others here to ask an explosive question: Is it time to reconsider this country's globally hailed drug model?'

Even the supporters of the scheme admit it has run into trouble. One recently conceded that 'what we have today no longer serves as an example to anyone'. But then they of course (as the Left always do when their plans go wrong) blame the failures on lack of public money.

What a contrast with 2009, when the ultra-free-market think tank, the Cato Institute, claimed: 'None of the parade of horrors that decriminalisation opponents in Portugal predicted, and that decriminalisation opponents around the world typically invoke, has come to pass.'

Maybe they hadn't then. Don't be too sure. I'll explain why this claim is dubious in a moment. But they have certainly happened now, and Porto's Mayor since 2013, Rui Moreira, has been kicking up a fuss about it since he abandoned his support for decriminalisation in a sweeping U-turn in 2019.

Having until then been keen on the national policy, he said instead that decriminalisation 'simply does not protect the overwhelming majority of the population'.

It's a pity it took him so long. Portugal's supposed miracle was exaggerated from the start. The official 'depenalisation' of drugs in fact confirmed a long-standing policy of not enforcing the law anyway.

This has been the policy of most Western countries for far too long. They (including the UK) pretend to have tough laws against drugs but just do not bother to apply them.

Law And Social Enquiry: The Journal Of The American Bar Foundation examined pre-'miracle' and post-'miracle' Portugal back in 2014 and found reason for doubt. 'The significance of this legislation has been misunderstood.

Decriminalisation did not trigger dramatic changes in drug-related behaviour because... the reforms were more modest than suggested by the media attention they received...'

As is often the case, the new law simply codified what had already been going on informally. Fewer than 1 percent of those locked up for a drug offence were in prison for drug possession in the year before the trumpeted change in the law.

So much for the idea, clung to by drug 'libertarians', that 2001 marked the gap between a period of severe prohibition and a wonderful new regime of enlightened tolerance. Last year another worrying fact emerged.

Decriminalisation of marijuana in Portugal in 2001 was followed by a large increase in reports of cannabis-induced psychosis, according to research published in the International Journal Of Methods In Psychiatric Research.

The number of hospitalisations with a primary diagnosis of psychotic disorders and schizophrenia associated with marijuana-use rose nearly 30-fold from 20 a year in 2010 to nearly 590 in 2015.

Which is hardly encouraging. As the Post also pointed out, all this makes for a nasty decay and decline in the general quality of life: 'Urban visibility of the drug problem, police say, is at its worst point in decades and the state-funded non-governmental organizations that have largely taken over responding to the people with addiction seem less concerned with treatment than affirming that lifetime drug use should be seen as a human right.'

Devastatingly, the Post recorded Leitao da Silva, head of Porto's municipal police, as saying the position now is comparable to the way things were before the supposed wonder year of 2001.

Portugal is not the only country admired by drug legalisers which has stepped back from the limits of letting things rip. Amsterdam, supposedly the marijuana capital of Europe, has banned the smoking of dope on the streets of its red-light district.

As the 'No Smoking Cannabis' signs went up in May, and 100-Euro fines began to be imposed, many locals rejoiced. They have had enough of the zombie world which decriminalisation brings: 'Finally, smoking cannabis is banned in public spaces', said Diederik Boomsma, an Amsterdam city councillor who has long campaigned for tourists to be banned from buying cannabis at all.

'This will send an important message to the gormless and feckless who think they can come here on a holiday from morality. Newsflash to all potheads: go giggle elsewhere! Let's hope that the citizens of Amsterdam reclaim their ancient, beautiful city centre from the glassy-eyed zombies.'

Quite probably, the zombies will come to Britain. For the sad truth is that the most ambitious experiment in letting drugs rip, in the whole of Europe, is under way here, on both sides of the Scottish border. Starting back in the 1970s, and accelerating rapidly in the last 20 years, the police and courts in this country have, in reality, more or less abandoned the prosecution of drug possession.

For their own different reasons, governments and drug legalisers pretend this is not happening. Governments do not want to admit to the surrender. Drug campaigners want full legalisation with advertising and drugs openly on sale in high streets, so have to claim the current mess of criminality, disease, mental illness misery and early death is caused by a non-existent 'prohibition'. Well, at least they won't have the failed Portuguese Miracle to support their rotten case, any more.