

Thinking is warped on cannabis legalisation

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Four men had to be rescued last weekend from England's highest mountain, Scafell Pike, after becoming "incapable of walking due to cannabis use". Said Cumbria police: "Words fail us."

Well, yes. Does everyone agree that these men placed an irresponsible burden on a public service? Apparently so. Does everyone agree that the use of cannabis should be discouraged to reduce its irresponsible burden on society? Well, no; quite the opposite.

Last week Prince William raised the "massive issue" of drug legalisation. Although he expressed no opinion, merely to raise it was inescapably to express one, since the only people for whom it is a "massive issue" are those who promote it.

At the Labour Party conference yesterday the comedian Russell Brand called for drugs to be decriminalised. At next week's Conservative conference, the free-market Adam Smith Institute will be pushing for the legalisation of cannabis. Legalisation means more users. That means more harm, not just to individuals but to society. The institute, however, describes cannabis as "a low-harm consumer product that most users enjoy without major problems". What? A huge amount of evidence shows that far from cannabis being less harmful than other illicit drugs, as befits its Class B classification, its effects are far more devastating.

Long-term potheads display on average an eight-point decline in IQ over time, an elevated risk of psychosis and permanent brain damage.

Cannabis is associated with a host of biological ill-effects including cirrhosis of the liver, strokes and heart attacks. People who use it are more likely than non-users to access other illegal drugs. And so on.

Ah, say the autonomy-loving free-marketeers, but it doesn't harm anyone other than the user. Well, that's not true either. It can destroy relationships with family, friends and employers. Users often display more antisocial behaviour, such as stealing money or lying to get a job, as well as a greater association with aggression, paranoia and violent death. According to Stuart Reece, an Australian professor of medicine, cannabis use in pregnancy has also been linked to an epidemic of gastroschisis, in which babies are born with intestines outside their abdomen, in at least 15 nations including the UK.

The legalisers' argument is that keeping cannabis illegal does not control the harm it does. Yet wherever its supply has been liberalised, its use and therefore the harm it does have both gone up. In 2001 Portugal decriminalised illegal drugs including cocaine, heroin and cannabis. Sparked by a report by the American free-market Cato Institute, which claimed this policy was a "resounding success", Portugal has been cited by legalisers everywhere as proof that liberalising drug laws is the magic bullet to erase the harm done by illegal drugs.

The truth is very different. In 2010 Manuel Pinto Coelho, of the Association for a Drug Free Portugal, wrote in the BMJ: "Drug decriminalisation in Portugal is a failure ... There is a complete and absurd campaign of manipulation of facts and figures of Portuguese drug policy ..."

According to the Portuguese Institute for Drugs and Drug Addiction, between 2001 and 2007 drug use increased by 4.2 per cent, while the number of people who had used drugs at least once rose from 7.8 per cent to 12 per cent. Cannabis use went up from 12.4 per cent to 17 per cent.

The latest evidence about Portugal, a study by the Intervention Service for Addictive Behaviours and Dependencies, shows "a rise in the prevalence of every illicit psychoactive substance from 8.3 per cent in 2012 to 10.2 per cent in 2016-17", with most of that rise down to increased cannabis use.

For free-marketeers, this evidence of devastating harm to individuals and society is irrelevant. Nothing can be allowed to dent their dogmatic belief that all human life is a transaction, market forces are a religion and the rights of the consumer are sacrosanct. Says the Adam Smith Institute about cannabis legalisation: "The object isn't harm elimination, it's not even harm reduction alone, it's utility maximisation." In other words, they want as many people as possible to be puffing on those spliffs.

Free-market libertarians are nothing if not consistent. They oppose policies to reduce social harm across the board. Smoking curbs, mandatory seat-belts, speed cameras, gambling restrictions, controls to end unmanageable immigration - they've been against them all.

Despite how they are viewed, there's nothing conservative about the free-marketeers. Far from conserving legal or social constraints, they want to tear them down in the name of consumer choice. The classical political thinkers they quote in support of applying market principles to every aspect of society never in fact subscribed to such a doctrine. Far from putting the autonomous self on a pedestal, Adam Smith himself in his Theory of Moral Sentiments put personal rights last and the interests of others first.

The distortion of such thinking is why Russell Brand and the Adam Smith Institute are soul mates. In a fearful symmetry, both the left and the free-market right deny the importance of conserving the social good. One calls it paternalism, the other the nanny state. Both are radically irresponsible and destructive. The only difference is the gender. And even that, in our current lifestyle free-for-all, is now surely up for grabs.