



Foulds: Fight drugs, addiction, gangs and violence with the weapon of decriminalization

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A quarter-century ago, Abbotsford had its moment of clarity with respect to drugs and gangs.

After repeated denials by the city's municipal police department that gangs were active in the Fraser Valley city, the truth was laid bare when 18-year-old **Kirby Martin** was shot and killed in a parking lot of a mall along the city's main strip, South Fraser Way.

His death was followed by acknowledgment from police that gangs were indeed part of life in the city and many community forums followed.

Despite the forums and subsequent years of warnings about the dangers of gang life, youth in Abbotsford and beyond continued to become gangsters, with Martin's Yale gang and the rival Countess gang spawning today's United Nations and Red Scorpions criminal organizations. Martin was killed in September 1990 and nothing has changed in Abbotsford, which is today known as much for its regular slayings of mostly young men as for its world-famous raspberries. Has Kamloops had its moment of clarity with respect to gangs and drug-related violence? Under a previous command, the Kamloops RCMP maintained that gangs that infested Kelowna, Vernon and the Lower Mainland had not established roots here, mainly due to intense police pressure. We later learned at least one gang, the Independent Soldiers under Kamloops leader **Jayme Russell**, had been here for some time.

So, with the rash of gunplay in Kamloops in the past two months and shootings stretching into last year, the question is on the lips of many: Is the violence linked to gangs? If so, which ones? If not, what the hell is happening in the Tournament Capital?

RCMP Supt. **Brad Mueller** heard the chatter and held a press conference this week to discuss what appears to many to be a Wild West mentality seizing the streets.

He said while many are fighting to control the drug trade, particularly in the wake of the September killing of Red Scorpions co-founder **Konaam Shirzad**, no gangs have established a foothold in Kamloops.

Mueller expressed frustration at the speed at which those arrested are released from custody, while local politicians and others have asked whether there are enough officers stationed in the city.

But here's the stone cold fact: Longer stints in prison and more Mounties will not change what is happening.

Stiffer prison sentences and beefed-up police forces have not worked during the decades-long failed war on drugs, so why are we still employing this definition of insanity when watching the bullets fly, the addictions grow and the dealers getting richer?

Sure, more cops may result in more arrests today. And tougher sentences may lead to longer prison terms tomorrow. But that will only create another vacuum so lucrative that people will literally risk their lives trying to fill it, as they have been doing for decades in B.C. and beyond. Prohibition has created wealthy bad guys since the 1920s and, until we realize prohibition is the root problem of the crime and addiction plaguing our society, no amount of uniformed men and women or prison cells will change that.

Want to really attempt to stop the carnage? Decriminalize all drugs and start prescribing to users. Begin there and work into the next steps of detox and rehab.

Portugal did just that in 2001 as it battled a losing war.

From the Cato Institute report of 2009: "By freeing its citizens from the fear of prosecution and imprisonment for drug usage, Portugal has dramatically improved its ability to encourage drug addicts to avail themselves of treatment. The resources that were previously devoted to prosecuting and imprisoning drug addicts are now available to provide treatment programs to addicts."

A 2014 policy paper by the Canadian Centre for Addiction and Mental Health confirmed Portugal has seen a reduction in substance abuse, drug-related harm and illicit drug use by adolescents.

The journey will be shaky as hell, but what do we have to lose?

Can it get any worse than what we are now facing with our long outdated approach to the issue?