

TEXT ONLY MAKE THIS MY HOMEPAGE

Irish Examiner.com

Home Ireland World Sport Business Opinion Breaking News [DATING](#) [CARS](#) [JOBS](#) [PROPERTY](#)
[EDITORIAL](#) [LETTERS](#) [COLUMNISTS](#) [BOOKS](#) [BOOK STORE](#)

Wednesday, September 16, 2009 [PREVIOUS EDITIONS](#)

Ireland: [Mostly cloudy with some brighter spells >](#)

Email+ Share+

There's a lesson from Lisbon that has nothing to do with that treaty

By Stephen King

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 16, 2009

Drug use remains illegal in Portugal. People are still stopped by the police and have their drugs confiscated. But drug use there is seen as a health, not a judicial, issue. Crucially, anyone caught with less than what is determined to be a 10-day personal supply is not arrested and does not face jail



YOU couldn't accuse the Taoiseach of over-promising: "The National Drugs Strategy 2009-2016, aimed at reducing the prevalence and harm of drug misuse, has enormous potential for good ... I have no doubt that the strategy and the efforts of all those involved in implementing it will change many people's lives for the better." Potential for good, changing lives for the better, yes, but actually reducing the abuse of narcotics, well, he wasn't fool enough to predict that.

Sign in to Irish Examiner
with Google Friend Connect

[more info >](#)

The strategy document contains no fewer than 63 recommendations, many of them sensible and humane. Shops selling drug paraphernalia will be monitored; all schools will have to develop substance use policies; detox facilities and methadone services will be expanded; an office of the minister for drugs will be created; prison security will be increased to reduce the availability of illegal drugs.

Find Rehab Now

Drug and Alcohol Treatment Center
Insurance Accepted: 888-629-0444
RehabInpatientDrug.com/CallNow

Wisely, the strategy also recommends that random roadside drug-testing of motorists should be implemented as soon as is technically and legally possible. All drivers involved in fatal road crashes will be tested to ascertain whether drugs were a factor.

Need Help with Addiction?

Help Finding Recovery. Trained Counselors - Non Profit
www.drug-rehab.org/addiction

But will the strategy for the next seven years be any more successful than the strategy it replaces? Most of those 63 recommendations merely build upon what has gone before. And what have we seen over the past seven years?

V V

Ads by Google

"Very significant progress has been made under the previous strategy," the Taoiseach claimed in one breath before admitting in that next that "the drugs problem continues to evolve and to throw up new challenges". That is code for "the drugs problem is out of control".

Ministers would furiously deny that interpretation but, if you think about it, they would be hard pressed to make a case that the drugs problem is exactly "under control" either. A study by the Health Research Board reported earlier this month that heroin and cocaine use is steadily increasing across Ireland. It is no longer just an issue for north inner city Dublin.

The Taoiseach listed diplomatically just some of the challenges: "The availability of a wider range of drugs; polydrug use as the norm; and the spread of drug misuse across the country".

Does that sound like "very significant progress" to you? No, of course not everyone is shooting up on a Friday night but drugs policy in Ireland hasn't even managed to contain the problem. let alone ameliorate the negative effects of

- Fi
- Job
- Car
- Dat
- Bo
- Ho
- Ho

street across the State.

If this were any other realm of policy, a radical rethink would be ordered but repressive policies towards drug users are firmly rooted in prejudices about young people, fear of people enjoying themselves, notions of class and ideological visions rather than in cold and hard assessment of the realities of drug abuse.

It is not a peculiarly Irish problem by any means. The new minister of state responsible for drugs policy, John Curran, goes through the motions like so many of his European equivalents, delivering a homily about "so-called recreational drug-users" needing to take a cold, hard look at themselves and the costs they could potentially inflict on the rest of society.

But put a line of coke in front of many young people at a party after they have had a couple of drinks and out goes any thought of ministers in Dublin — and out too comes the €20 note.

Frankly, ministers are urinating in the wind.

Don't get me wrong. Drug abuse is a major public health problem. Its societal costs are considerable. Addiction can lead to financial ruin. But banning the drug trade creates economic distortions and an opportunity for the most unsavoury elements to gain dominant positions. The black market premium ensures it remains in the hands of criminal elements that do not shrink from bribery, intimidation and murder.

But we have to live in the real world. If Ireland legalised the likes of cocaine and heroin and methamphetamines, the international reaction would be far more extreme than if, say, the Lisbon Treaty were to be sent back for a proper rewrite.

What we could try doing is something altogether less radical but, as the evidence suggests, might really make some "very significant progress", unlike the various strategies to date.

In 2001, the Portuguese government's decision to decriminalise the personal use and possession of all drugs, including the so-called hard ones, was greeted with something approaching apoplexy. "Lunacy" said some. The Algarve would become the drug tourist destination of choice for the whole of Europe.

Eight years on, the nightmare scenarios foreseen by the policy's critics have not materialised. Instead, a poor, socially conservative country with some of the scariest levels of hard drug abuse has actually managed to come to grips with the issue.

Drug use remains illegal in Portugal. People are still stopped by the police and have their drugs confiscated. But drug use there is seen as a health, not a judicial, issue. Crucially, anyone caught with less than what is determined to be a 10-day personal supply is not arrested and does not face jail. If you are caught with a personal supply, it is instead treated as an administrative offence: you get a ticket and a summons to appear before a government-appointed "dissuasion commission" — a tribunal made up of people with legal, medical or social work backgrounds.

The aim of the dissuasion commissions is to encourage addicts to undergo treatment and to stop recreational users falling into addiction.

The Portuguese police turn some 7,500 people a year over to the commissions. If they find any suggestion that the person before them is actually a drug dealer, the case is referred to a criminal court. Where that is not the case, the commissions have the power to impose community work and even fines but treatment, not punishment, is their main aim.

THAT means health workers in Portugal no longer have to work under the paradox that exists in Ireland of providing support and medical care to people the law considers criminals. Before decriminalisation, addicts were afraid to seek treatment because they feared they would be shopped to the police and arrested. No longer.

The results have been impressive. In 2001, 26% of Portuguese aged 16 to 18 had smoked cannabis. By 2006, that number had dropped to 19%. Over the same time period, ecstasy, cocaine and amphetamine use was cut in half.

The police initially resisted the new approach, but over the years the number of citations handed out has steadily increased. Moreover, a study by the Cato

quadrupled to 24,000 in the last decade at the same time as the number of people using drugs has actually declined. All that money saved on enforcement and jail has allowed for increased funding of drug-free treatment like methadone.

Following decriminalisation, new HIV infections in Portuguese drug users fell by 17% between 1999 and 2003. Deaths related to heroin and similar drugs have been cut by more than half. Portugal also has the lowest rate of lifetime cannabis use in people over 15 in the EU: just 10%. In America, it is four times higher.

When it comes to drugs policy, if nothing else, Lisbon might have the answers. (And, no, that is not guidance on how to vote in the referendum).

This story appeared in the printed version of the Irish Examiner Wednesday, September 16, 2009

TCH Group »

News

Breaking News
Ireland
World
Business
Sport
Opinion
Weather

Features

Books
Book Store
Food
Property
Sport Blog
Travel
DVD Reviews
Film Reviews
Horoscopes
Soap Watch

Services

Archives
Family Notices
Lotto
Mobile
RSS

Help

FAQ
Contact Us
Media Pack
Privacy Policy
Subscriptions
Terms and Conditions
Text Only