

# Politicians should say what they really think about drugs

**Real debate about drugs and addiction is considered taboo by the political class, says Andrew M Brown.**



Prescription drugs are increasingly a problem Photo: Getty  
By Andrew M Brown 6:24PM GMT 16 Dec 2010

## [88 Comments](#)

As a rule, politicians only feel able to say what they really think about drugs once they're safely out of office. Yesterday, Bob Ainsworth, the minister responsible for narcotics policy between 2001 and 2003, called for an end to the "war on drugs", arguing that addiction is a medical problem and that millions of pounds are being spent without preventing the wide availability of addictive chemicals. Peter Lilley, the former Conservative cabinet minister, agreed with him. "The current approach to drugs has been an expensive failure," he said. "For the sake of everyone, and the young in particular, it is time for all politicians to stop using the issue as a political football."

Do they have a point? After all, the purpose of banning drugs, when prohibition took off in the early 20th century, was to reduce the harm they do. On that measure, our laws have been a dismal failure. Addiction costs the British economy billions every year, while channelling billions more to criminal networks.

Simply enforcing the law more stringently, as some propose, is not much of an answer, since few people want to see teenagers filling up prisons for possessing small amounts of

cannabis. So what would actually happen if the prohibition on the sale of drugs were lifted?

That's the trouble: no one knows. The last time all drugs were legally available was the mid-19th century, and that was a more ordered era: then, you could buy laudanum – an alcoholic tincture of opium – for medicinal purposes, in your local corner shop. Some ordinary folk gulped it daily, a bit like Valium 100 years later. In East Anglia, they grew opium poppies in the fields, and used them to fortify the beer. Even fractious babies were dosed with the stuff, which caused some unfortunate accidents. Cocaine, meanwhile, was a key ingredient in a variety of invigorating tonics.

Despite such widespread availability of narcotics, society didn't fall apart – but then, the Victorians had social pressures which acted as restraints on behaviour. These days, more people than ever before seem to struggle with their appetites, whether for food, sex, booze or drugs. It's possible that liberalising the law would lead to a catastrophic increase in the number of addicts.

#### Related Articles

- [\*\*Legalise all drugs, says former Labour Home Office minister\*\*](#)  
16 Dec 2010
- [\*\*Fines for NHS hospitals over failure to address mixed-sex wards will hurt patients\*\*](#)  
16 Dec 2010
- [\*\*Gang members could be banned from entering rival territory or wearing distinctive 'colours'\*\*](#)  
16 Dec 2010
- [\*\*UN lifts Iraq nuclear weapons sanctions\*\*](#)  
16 Dec 2010
- [\*\*Property industry attacks Government over 'damaging' change to empty rate tax\*\*](#)  
16 Dec 2010

- **Why are more and more women self-harming?**

16 Dec 2010

Mind you, there is one European country where the government has tried a liberal approach: Portugal. In 2001, the Portuguese enacted a law that decriminalised all drugs. The evidence so far shows no explosion of addiction, nor has Lisbon turned into a cesspit awash with drug traffickers, as some predicted. “Judged by virtually every available metric,” says Glenn Greenwald of the Cato Institute, a libertarian US think tank, “the Portuguese decriminalisation framework has been a resounding success.” In the first five years of the new policy, illegal drug use among teenagers declined, as did deaths caused by drug use. Portugal now has among the lowest rates of drug use in the EU.

Amid this week’s fuss, we should remember that Bob Ainsworth is an ex-trade union leader from Coventry, not some hippy libertarian proposing hedonism for all. He simply thinks that the current system is causing more harm than good, and we should try something different. He is acknowledging that the debate is changing and that a new approach is needed.

The nature of the problem is changing, too – even the nature of the drugs themselves. The medicine cabinets of Middle England are increasingly stocked with painkillers – prescribed by doctors – that are every bit as potent as anything that can be bought from a street-corner dealer. These are drugs, too, but they’re perfectly legal ones. So Mr Ainsworth’s remarks are to be welcomed. At the moment, we live in a strange world in which politicians are frightened to talk about the realities of drugs in the way the rest of us do. It’s about time we allowed them to say what they really think.