

POPULAR

- [Conrad Black: Much ado about China Kelly McParland: NHL loses its white knight and might be stuck with Sir Jim of RIM David Frum: Why so little outcry from Washington on al-Megrahi? David Frum on Ted Kennedy: Death of a big soul Lorne Gunter: Alberta needs to learn to say no to spending Don Martin: Are party loyalists the best Harper can come up with? Kelly McParland: Rosemary Port's absolute right to insult Charles Lewis: Ted Kennedy's second death Conrad Black: Remembering Ted Kennedy, an unremarkable survivor Raphael Alexander: Omar Khadr and the Lockerbie effect](#)

[Main](#) | [About](#) | [Contact Editor](#) | [Subscribe RSS](#)

Colby Cosh: Mexico and Argentina decriminalize drugs, Washington shrugs

Posted: August 28, 2009, 8:55 AM by NP Editor

[Colby Cosh](#)



Say, are we still having that debate over whether the United States constitutes an empire? I remember the idea seeming controversial a few years back. In 2009, the whole idea of disagreeing with it seems quaint. But maybe things will look different in a few more years. Empires do not rise and fall monotonically; they expand and contract, relax and relent. In an extraordinary turn of events, Caesar has temporarily turned a blind eye to the policing of morals in the provinces, allowing startling drug reforms in two major "partner" states.

Late last week, the Mexican government, trying explicitly not to call too much attention to what it was doing, decriminalized the possession of very small amounts of illicit drugs. Not just marijuana, which is subject to a possession limit of five grams, but the whole kaboodle: cocaine, methamphetamine, LSD, even heroin. In general the U. S. media treated this as a counter-intuitive move made in the midst of a full-scale war between drug cartels and the Mexican state. But it is precisely the bloodiness of that war that has Mexico moving away from ideological prohibitionism.

The idea is to cut into demand by treating addicts as potential treatment clients rather than criminals, to fight corruption among the police by taking away one of their major tools for shaking down the poor and marginalized, and to concentrate resources on organized crime. This is, of course, a form of centralized social planning just as much as total prohibition is. Even a borderline-anarchist libertarian (like me) might well question whether it will accomplish the criteria of social peace and harm reduction by which it will be judged; Cato Institute fellow and Harvard economist Jeffrey Miron, for one, worries that decriminalization will get the blame if intensified supply-side enforcement leads to more violence.

But the Portuguese model on which the Mexican reform is based, which saw the adoption of Europe's most liberal drug laws in 2001, has been successful in all the ways that most of us would consider important, particularly in reducing the spread of HIV and exposure to drugs amongst teenagers. One feels that what's needed above all else right now, when it comes to drugs, is a little openness and sincerity. The single worst effect of criminalizing drug possession is to make it harder for everyone to talk about drugs. It has created a world (although things have changed a lot in the last 20 years) where most everyone has taken a bong hit at one time or another, but no one wants to admit it, whether it's to their kids or to co-workers or in the newspaper.

And that, in turn, has made it harder to make the core argument that it is none of the state's business what you put in your body. (Doing so inevitably comes off as sounding like a coded apology for past indiscretions.) But in some places it is being made anyway. On Tuesday the Supreme Court of Argentina reversed the conviction of a 19-year-old caught with two grams of pot and decriminalized the possession of drugs for personal consumption. The Kirchner government anticipated the ruling and says it is content to abide by it; meanwhile, other Latin states, including Brazil, are talking about following suit. Crucial to the logic of the court's decision was an article in the Argentine constitution that states, "The private actions of men which in no way offend public order or morality, nor injure a third party, are only reserved to God and are exempted from the authority of judges."

E-MAIL
[Send a note to the editor](#)

Search...

[Welcome to Full Comment](#)

[About the blog of the National Post Comment section.](#)

[Editor: Kelly McParland \(e-mail\)](#)

A note on reader comments: Your comments are welcomed. We accept new comments for 24 hours after the initial posting of most entries.



27/08/09: It's no exaggeration to say Canada's system is in crisis. There are nearly 61,000 outstanding refugee claims. It takes an average of 17 months for a claim to be heard by the Immigration and Refugee Board — and once it makes a

decision, appeals can drag on for years. Perhaps most worryingly, many people ordered deported after their claims are rejected simply disappear. There are tens of thousands of outstanding deportation orders. Meanwhile, the only way to stem the tide of Mexican and Czech refugee claimants has been to impose diplomatically awkward tourist visas. And even as the system wades through thousands of doomed claims, the world's most persecuted people have no access to it at all — simply because they can't get here. James Bissett, head of Canada's immigration service from 1985 to 1990, joins host Chris Selley to discuss how we can fix it.



You can listen to the [Full Comment podcast archive](#) here on Nationalpost.com. It's also available through an

It's a sentiment one might have expected to hear coming from the U. S. A., at one time. President Obama has been a disappointment to the harm-reduction crowd when it comes to domestic drug reform, but the rapid pace of change in the Latin world shows that the State Department is no longer imposing its will there. Whether it's because Washington has more urgent priorities like saving the American economy from reverting to the Stone Age, or just because the Bush administration's cadre of drug warriors is gone, American satellites seem to find themselves free to go their own way, perhaps only for a brief moment.

Canadians who have argued that the adoption of a harm-reduction approach here would jeopardize our trade relationship with the United States can therefore pipe down for the foreseeable future. Unfortunately, we greet the occasion with a law-and-order he-man Conservative government in place -- one which, whatever its virtues when it comes to crimes that have victims, is full of people like Peter van Loan, Rob Nicholson and Tony Clement, and plenty of others who are about as likely to give birth to a muskox on the steps of Parliament as they are to support rational drug policy. From that standpoint, our timing sorta stinks.

National Post
colbycosh@gmail.com

BOOKMARK Comments (11) Send to a friend Permalink

11 Comments

You must be logged in to post a comment

[Click here to post a comment](#)

by Baby Seal
Clubber

Good article for once, Mr Cosh

Aug 28 2009
9:05 AM

by Mel from
Calgary

Perhaps Mr.Cosh could start criticising the Conservatives with the same intensity he did the Liberals.

Aug 28 2009
9:15 AM

by Logicool
Aug 28 2009
9:36 AM

Colby, you should go done to Argentina and tell everyone you meet that in fact Argentina is a satellite of the US. See the reception you get. I doubt many in Washington agree with the majority of policies of Argentina over the past 10 years (defaults on debt that hurt US companies for one, a wonky economic strategy, etc..)

Even Mexico for that matter. Did Mexico send any troops to Iraq or Afghanistan as befits a satellite?

Perhaps a subscription to a good world affairs magazine is in order?

by Ed_BC
Aug 28 2009
9:38 AM

Bravo, Mr. Cosh! Well said.

by Michael
Pilgrim
Aug 28 2009
10:13 AM

On common ground with you on this one, Mr. Cosh.

It's possible for some of us to meet in the middle on issues where the black and white of strictly Left and Right blends into gray.

These are the kind of issues that reveal that the Right is not as united or homogenous as some might think. Around this issue, I'm sure the traditional law-and-order social conservatives are once again clucking their tongues in disapproval at Mr. Cosh's

[iTunes subscription.](#)



Full Comment: Full Pundit

[Chris Selley's Full Pundit: They're partisan hacks, but they're our partisan hacks](#)

[Chris Selley: How he learned to stop worrying and love the stimulus](#)

[Chris Selley's Full Pundit: The final analysis of Ted Kennedy](#)

[Chris Selley's Full Pundit: Feed a cold, starve election fever](#)

[Chris Selley's Full Pundit: Should Elizabeth May just give up?](#)

[Chris Selley: Third World crapshoot for travelling Canadians](#)

[Chris Selley's Full Pundit: Michael Ignatieff + cowboy hat = tuxedo = victory!](#)

[Chris Selley: Turning the Islands into Toronto's Central Park](#)

[Chris Selley's Full Pundit: A bold new way for politicians to make and break promises](#)

[Chris Selley's Full Pundit: Shouldn't you be wearing a life jacket right now?](#)

Subscribe to Full Comment

- [RSS Feed](#)
- [ATOM Feed](#)



Read more commentary on Canadian and global business, politics and the fight against junk science on our [FP Comment blog](#) or [subscribe via RSS](#).

Including columns from Terence Corcoran, Lawrence Solomon, Peter Foster, William Watson and guest columns from the leading names in economics, business and politics.

Recent Comments

[Johnnytwtimes..good point Canadians and Americans love to borrow on their credit cards at 24% or whatever. Over the years I have seen many very](#)

principled libertarianism. The question again is asked: [intelligent people...](#)
Are libertarians actually more closely aligned with liberals? (Please note the intentional lower case "l" in liberal.)
-Digger Don
[Full Comment](#)

by Rhino Party Whip
Aug 28 2009
10:24 AM

Mr. Cosh: You are in a position to demonstrate that 'people like Peter van Loan, Rob Nicholson and Tony Clement' may be posing as law-and-order types but are only the useful idiots of organized crime.
-kravdraa
[Full Comment](#)

[I think Bernie Farber is blowing this whole thing all out of proportion. In his usual hysterical way, he sees the return of a 900 year old 'blood libel'. Of course...](#)

by Sassylassie
Aug 28 2009
10:34 AM

Harm reduction is a tarted up phrase which really means: Enabling people with addictions by normalizing said behavior and if that isn't harmful enough they want to give them needles and drugs. We start doing the above and we are going down a slippery slope to hell.
-marq65
[Full Comment](#)

[It's all about laziness ... five billion for fifteen helicopters in the middle of a recession ... \\$12.5B federal deficit in the first quarter, \\$11.2B federal deficit...](#)

by tablogloid
Aug 28 2009
11:09 AM

This has been an incredible week. First, I agree with Michael Coren's views on the "childless by choicers" and now I find myself agreeing completely with Colby Cosh on drug policy. What have I been smoking?

[Never ends for you guys, eh?](#)
-JohnnyTwoTimes
[Full Comment](#)

Recent Posts

by RogersJi
Aug 28 2009
11:55 AM

Cosh: Your final comments were unnecessary and hurt the rest of your column.

[Dutch nanny state rules 13-year-old too young to sail round the world solo](#)
-Araminta Wordsworth
[Full Comment](#)

by AJR79
Aug 28 2009
1:42 PM

Mr.Cosh, Your articles are "Chicken soup for the Soul" of my inner, rational-liertarian.

[Raphael Alexander: Chatting with Senator Demers](#)
-NP Editor
[Full Comment](#)

Please contiuue to rally the troops against this social engineering of the right, just as wrong-headed dangerous as that of the left.

[At last we know what 'shovel-ready' means:](#)
-NP Editor
[Full Comment](#)

Also: Your last paragraph was amusing, and warranted.

by Straightup
Aug 28 2009
2:02 PM

Good article. My heart goes out to those that suffer...but drugs in the end are a symptom of something else.

[Bernie Farber: Sweden's embrace of the blood libel](#)
-NP Editor
[Full Comment](#)

Politics in full

However, if you want to damage your life there's really not much I can do about it and it's your prerogative to do so.

[Full Comment on Canadian Politics](#)
[Posted on Canadian Politics](#)
[Our politics page](#)
[Follow us on Twitter](#) (nppolitics)

Alcohol prohibition all but gave money to organized crime and cost tax payers much to fight them. They legalized it and taxed it. Problem solved...

Comment links

People still abuse alcohol but I think the later is worse.

- [Colby Cosh](#)
- [Victor Davis Hanson](#)
- [Transterrestrial Musings](#)
- [Little Green Footballs](#)
- [Iraq the Model](#)
- [Jihad Watch](#)
- [Stephen Taylor](#)
- [Arts & Letters Daily](#)

Perhaps as a society we need to look closer at the symptoms...

Related Posts

August 25, 2009,
8:03 AM

[Colby Cosh: Ireland's New Age blasphemy law](#) by NP Editor
TAGS: [Colby Cosh](#), [Full Comment](#) [19 Comments](#)

August 21, 2009,
8:39 AM

[Colby Cosh: A man and his guitar vs. United Airlines](#) by NP Editor
TAGS: [Colby Cosh](#), [Full Comment](#) [12 Comments](#)

Full Comment Mobile

Get headlines and stories from Full Comment and other National Post feeds delivered straight to your BlackBerry or Windows Mobile-powered PDA with

- August 17, 2009, 7:10 PM [Colby Cosh: Clemency debate a waste of time](#) by Ron Nurwisah
 TAGS: [Colby Cosh](#), [Canadian politics](#) [46 Comments](#) Viigo. Free, instant, lightning-fast access gets you what you want, when you want it.

- August 14, 2009, 9:45 AM [Colby Cosh: The Kennedy in the attic](#) by NP Editor
 TAGS: [Colby Cosh](#), [Full Comment](#) [16 Comments](#) [Click here to get started.](#)

- August 13, 2009, 5:30 PM [Colby Cosh: The man who changed the guitar, and us](#) by NP Editor
 TAGS: [Colby Cosh](#), [Full Comment](#) [10 Comments](#)

Services: [Privacy](#) | [Terms](#) | [Contact us](#) | [Advertise with us](#) | [FAQ](#) | [Copyright and permissions](#) | [Today's paper](#) | [Digital paper](#) | [Newsletters](#) | [News Feeds](#) | [Subscription services](#) | [Site map](#)

National Post: [Home](#) | [News](#) | [Opinion](#) | [Arts](#) | [Life](#) | [Sports](#) | [Cars](#) | [Multimedia](#) | [Blogs](#) | [Classifieds](#)

Financial Post: [Home](#) | [News](#) | [Opinion](#) | [Trading Desk](#) | [Markets](#) | [Money](#) | [Small Business](#) | [Executive](#) | [Careers](#) | [Reports](#) | [FP Magazine](#)

National Post and **Financial Post** are Part of the Canada.com Network

© 2009 The National Post Company. All rights reserved. Unauthorized distribution, transmission or republication strictly prohibited.