



U.S. should mimic Portugal's wise, working drug policy

February 19, 2013

America has a money problem. It has a law-enforcement problem. It has a prisons problem. It has many other woes, but these three are viable concerns expressed not only by government but also by citizen polling.

We have the ability to do something that would, while admittedly not solving these issues, at least provide real, provable relief for all of them.

We should follow Portugal's decade-old lead. Decriminalize drugs. All of them, even the heavy hitters.

That statement will provoke an emotional response. It will draw morality-based arguments. It will lead to the quick, but unproven, argument that "Legalizing drugs will mean more drug users."

Portugal is a strongly religious nation - 81 percent Catholic. Moral. Yes. And yet, when faced with burgeoning drug trade and the increased social problems that come with it, the nation's leaders decided on a counterintuitive solution: Decriminalize.

Ten years later, what have they to show for their exceptionally bold decision?

Drug abuse is down by half, according to blogger Erik Kain at Forbes.com.

Further, according to a Cato Institute study reported on by Glenn Greenwald, "none of the nightmare scenarios touted by pre-enactment decriminalization opponents - from rampant increases in drug usage among the young to the transformation of Lisbon into a haven for 'drug tourists' - has occurred."

It's important to note that drug possession for personal use is still technically illegal in Portugal. However, it has no criminal element. Cases do not enter the court system; there is no prison component. However, drug trafficking continues to be a crime, and we would not have it any other way in this country, either.

Decriminalizing drugs allows for greater access to addiction help for those with problems. Rather than jailing them and allowing a cycle of use, imprisonment, release, use and repeated criminal activity, Portugal focuses on treatment for those who need it, with provable positive results and no negative social side effects.

The War on Drugs by the United States makes headlines. It allows for emotional responses by those with a moral argument against use of such material. But it doesn't make sense. Not from a financial sense. Not from a social sense.

Another note from Greenwald's report: "Data indicate that decriminalization has had no adverse effect on drug usage rates in Portugal, which, in numerous categories, are now among the lowest in the EU, particularly when compared with states with stringent criminalization regimes."

That is hugely telling. Nations with their own "Wars on Drugs" have more of a drug problem than the one that takes the most hands-off approach. Someone in power in America should be paying attention, but we're trapped in emotional thinking (Drugs are bad!) rather than rationalism. That must change.

We can't argue on moral ground. Morality is an individual choice, guided by that individual's own beliefs, views and makeup. But from a legal standpoint, from the standpoint of real-world data from Portugal on how its system has worked, it's impossible for us to argue against it. And we don't.

Quoting Greenwald again, "Judging by every metric, decriminalization in Portugal has been a resounding success. It has enabled the Portuguese government to manage and control the drug problem far better than virtually every other Western country does."

Certainly better than the United States, which has thrown billions upon billions of dollars at always ineffective interdiction efforts. Drugs are not a part of everyone's life. They will not be so if they are reasonably available without legal concerns.

They are so much a part of some people's lives that those individuals have no room for any other kind of life. Those are the people that a Portugal-like change in this country could help and change.

The data are there. Such an act could have real financial benefit for the United States - by which we mean the tax-paying public - as well as easing strains on law-enforcement and our prison system. Such an argument is one that needs to be made - calmly, rationally, outside of moral and emotional arguments.

We're decades overdue.

Portugal has proven that now for 10 years. When do we learn?