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Thursday, 19 May 2011

Closed to Consideration of Drug Reform



At 6:30am last Thursday morning, the body of a young man was found in Bradford[1] a short distance from where two others were found on Tuesday. One local is quoted as saying “I bet it’s drugs-related, that’s a real issue round here.” Though police are yet to confirm this, it’s no secret that drug wars claim many lives in British cities and are destabilising entire regions in countries such as Mexico. The website of the US organisation Students for Sensible Drug Policy details this international tragedy[2].

Ten years ago, Portugal became the first (and so far only) Western nation to decriminalise drug use. In 2009, a report by the Cato Institute showed that the policy had been a resounding success, with drug use for under-18s down; over-15 drug use the lowest in Europe; large numbers emerging from the underworld and into treatment; and the spread of AIDS/HIV down 17% in the first four years[3]. It also relieves the stress on the criminal justice system as drug users receive therapy rather than prosecution and imprisonment.

Even in the US, home of the all-powerful Drug Enforcement Agency, attitudes have changed. The Republican presidential-nominee Ron Paul has been speaking out against the prohibition of drugs[4] which he believes is oppressive and prevents medicinal usage. About a dozen states have reduced the penalties for marijuana possession[5], most notably California where it is currently permitted for medical usage.

Further evidence has emerged in the last few days that the Home Office do not share the open mind of our foreign counterparts. Thanks to Bob Ainsworth MP’s questions to the Secretary of State for the Home Department[6] regarding 2010’s annual review, we know that not only was there no consideration of the results of Portugal’s decriminalisation approach but no consideration of a regulatory alternative had even been considered.

I wrote previously about the liberal views of the Liberal Democrats on this issue[7]. Many within Parliament are hopeful that action on this issue will be taken by the government before the next election. A recent article in *the Spectator*[8] has reminded us that on several occasions in the past, Cameron has spoken in favour of a regulatory approach. Yet, as mentioned in my previous article, Cameron has somewhat backtracked since arriving at Number 10.



While it’s right to be angry at the killers and their drug wars, it doesn’t really get us anywhere. Despite the billion of dollars spent internationally and the incalculable devastation that such warfare brings, drug use hasn’t abated. J.S. Mill prophesied this, arguing prohibition is never effectual, no matter what ‘tyrannical powers’ are used to combat vices[9]. The solution to Mill was regulation – an approach that would reduce costs, lower crime, raise revenue, increase safety and decrease the number of youths criminalised for an act committed upon themselves only. Unless the media and the public are willing to consider drug reform in such a holistic and non-reactionary way, politicians like Bob Ainsworth will be a brave but isolated few.

By David M Gibson

[1] <http://www.metro.co.uk/news/863075-third-body-discovered-in-bradford-as-drug-wars-fear-grows>

[2] <http://ssdp.org/>

[3] <http://www.time.com/time/health/article/0,8599,1893946,00.html>

[4] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2QiXcHfm-zI>

[5] <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/02/us/politics/02pot.html>

[6] <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmhansrd/cm110509/text/110509w0003.htm>

[7] http://www.tfa.net/the_freedom_association/2011/05/election-2011-what-now-for-orange-book-freedom.html

[8] <http://www.spectator.co.uk/alexmassie/6936315/just-say-yes-dave.shtml>

[9] J.S. Mill, *On Liberty*, 1859. Mill's comments referred primarily to gambling dens, yet given his similar views for 'poisons' and other vices, it is likely he would extend this to modern illegal drugs.



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