

Portugal's experience points to drug solution

Political will needed but Tories going other way

BY ETHAN BARON, THE PROVINCE JUNE 29, 2010

It has become clear that arresting, prosecuting and jailing heroin and crack addicts doesn't make them stop using drugs. The illegal drug trade continues to fuel crime and gang violence, and the social and health effects of addiction push the cost to \$8.2 billion a year across Canada, according to a 2007 report by the Health Officers Council of B.C.

Until now, debate over the issue has tended toward the extremes: legalize drugs or impose harsher penalties. Both solutions are misguided, and the polarized controversy has obscured the middle ground, where lie the best solutions.

Two Vancouver-based organizations -- the B.C. Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS and the International Centre for Science and Drug Policy (ICSDP) -- have played a key role in drafting a declaration advocating the worldwide decriminalization of drugs.

The "Vienna Declaration" is the manifesto for next month's 2010 International AIDS Conference in Vienna. University of B.C. associate professor and ICSDP founder Evan Wood chaired the writing committee.

"There is no evidence that increasing the ferocity of law enforcement meaningfully reduces the prevalence of drug use," the declaration says.

"Billions of tax dollars [are] wasted on a 'war on drugs' approach to drug control that does not achieve its stated objectives."

Wood often refers to the results Portugal achieved by decriminalizing all drugs -- including heroin and cocaine -- in 2001. And a 2009 Cato Institute report on Portugal's experience shows that dealing with drug use as a health and social issue, rather than as a crime, produces surprising results.

Before Portugal decriminalized drugs, opponents of the plan predicted vast increases

in drug abuse and

warned the country would attract hordes of drug tourists.

"None of the nightmare scenarios . . . has occurred," says the Cato report by Glenn Greenwald. "While drug addiction, usage, and associated pathologies continue to skyrocket in many EU states, those problems -- in virtually every relevant category -- have been either contained or measurably improved within Portugal since 2001."

In Portugal, it's still against the law to possess or use illicit drugs. Drug trafficking is still a criminal offence. What's changed is the response when people are caught for using or possessing a 10-day supply of drugs or less.

There are no criminal charges, just a citation and a summons to a three-member "dissuasion commission" composed of officials with expertise in the law, health and social services.

Commission members hear the circumstances of the person and their drug offence and determine whether the person is an addict. Fines can be issued or fines can be issued then waived, conditional upon the person entering a treatment program.

Public money saved by decriminalizing drugs has been diverted into drug treatment, the Cato report says.

"Treatment programs -- both in terms of funding levels and the willingness of the population to seek them -- have improved substantially."

As well, the number of addicts newly infected with HIV has dropped steadily since 2001.

Here in B.C., the political will to create more addiction-treatment space falls far behind the need and our drug-related costs -- financial and human -- continue out of control.

Decriminalization would free up millions of dollars for an expanded treatment system and prevention programs. Unfortunately, the legal changes are required at the federal level, where the Stephen Harper government is going in the opposite direction.

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