



Cameron Joins Obama, Rejects Drug Decriminalization Despite Empirical Evidence it Works

Matthew Feeney | Dec. 10, 2012 2:38 pm

Today, British Prime Minister David Cameron rejected recommendations from Members of Parliament to consider the decriminalization of drugs. The Home Affairs Committee undertook a year-long inquiry into the U.K.'s drug policy and produced a report that includes the following:

42. We were impressed by what we saw of the Portuguese depenalised system. It had clearly reduced public concern about drug use in that country, and was supported by all political parties and the police. The current political debate in Portugal is about how treatment is funded and its governance structures, not about depenalisation itself. Although it is not certain that the Portuguese experience could be replicated in the UK, given societal differences, we believe this is a model that merits significantly closer consideration. (Paragraph 243)

43. Following the legalisation of marijuana in the states of Washington and Colorado and the proposed state monopoly of cannabis production and sale in Uruguay, we recommend that the Government fund a detailed research project to monitor the effects of each legalisation system to measure the effectiveness of each and the overall costs and benefits of cannabis legalisation. (Paragraph 248)

Cameron has rejected the call to consider Portugal's example, saying that, "I don't support decriminalisation. We have a policy which actually is working in Britain."

It is true that government data does suggest that drug use has been going down. The number of 16 to 59 year-olds in England and Wales who reported using drugs in the last year has dropped from 11.1 percent in 1996 to 8.9 percent in 2011/12. However, use of Class A drugs (cocaine, ecstasy, LSD, magic mushrooms) has increased in the same time from 2.7 percent to 3 percent. Since the current government came to power in 2010 the rate of adults reporting use of Class A drugs in the last year dropped from 3.1

percent to 3 percent. The Home Affairs Committee specifically outlined the trend in British drug taking among young adults:

4. Illicit drug use is, in fact, falling—according to the crime survey of England and Wales, it is at almost its lowest level since measurements began in 1996^[9]—but the types of drugs that people are seeking treatment for has changed. This is especially true of the 18-24 age group, among whom heroin use has fallen sharply to about a third of the level it was at six or seven years ago. However, in the same time-period, the significantly smaller number of young people seeking treatment for problem cannabis use has risen by around a third, from 3,328 in 2005-06 to 4,741 in 2011-12.

The report also mentions prisons, where one in eight British prisoners will develop a drug problem. A report from the think tank Policy Exchange explains how some of the drug abuse in British prisons is a result of random drug testing, which encourages the use of hard drugs over drugs like marijuana because hard drugs are traceable for a shorter period of time.

While some of these trends and figures might be encouraging to Cameron they are not as impressive as the numbers in Portugal, where all drugs have been decriminalized since 2001. It has been over ten years since the decriminalization policy was introduced, and the results have been encouraging: the number addicts hooked on hard drugs is down by half since the early 1990s, and the number of drug users who suffer from infections thanks to intravenous drug use is down. In Portugal there is currently no major push for Portugal to go back to its previous drug policy.

One of the U.K.'s most prominent drug warriors, Peter Hitchens, has slammed the report and mentioned that it gives not mention to Sweden or Greece:

The Home Affairs Committee Report on drugs is remarkably dull, and seems to have been something of a damp squid, barely mentioned by many newspapers this morning. It is interesting that the committee chose to visit Portugal, which, as I have mentioned here before, is not perhaps the poster-boy for decriminalisation that the Cato Institute, itself far from neutral, has claimed (there are varying accounts of this episode, and I would say the jury was still out).

But they did not visit Sweden, one of the few advanced countries which has not followed the fashion for going soft on cannabis, or Greece (which one correspondent tells me has been conducting a fairly stringent campaign to clamp down on drugs. I am looking into this).

Hitchens is the author of *The War We Never Fought*, which details what Hitchens characterizes as the British establishment's surrender to drugs. I would encourage all readers to regularly visit Hitchens' blog, it's never dull. Hitchens gave his own thoughts on the war on drugs at my old stomping ground, the Institute of Economic Affairs. It is frustrating enough that Cameron does not think that Portugal's example is worthy of serious consideration. Some have been quick to argue that drug policy should be based on moral considerations, not empirical evidence. Writing for *The Telegraph*, Thomas Pascoe says that taking drugs is a moral issue while also making the argument that legalizing drugs somehow legitimizes drug use, a connection that is not explained or adequately defended. I don't see how a product being legal means that the product is implicitly legitimized or endorsed, nor do I see how alcohol would fit into Pascoe's framework.

David Cameron is not the only politician to dismiss decriminalization. President Obama once thought that the war on drugs was a failure and that decriminalization was a viable option.