

Legalise it!

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THE LEGALISATION OF CANNABIS is now being debated openly by sections of the European ruling class. In localised areas like Amsterdam they have been conducting a 20 year experiment into the effects of legalisation. In Switzerland they are experimenting with the decriminalisation of small quantities of heroin. According to the British Guardian one well-known brewery, Carlsberg-Tetley, has been investigating the hash cafes of Amsterdam with a view to running similar establishments in Britain. In Italy a referendum in March of 1993 ended the obligatory penal sentence for cannabis possession and in Germany earlier this year the Supreme Court suggested personal possession of drugs should not be prosecuted.

Even senior police are getting in on the act, Raymond Kendall (head of Interpol) and Commander John Grieve of Scotland Yard have both recently suggested it's time to legalise at least some drugs. Best of all perhaps was Keith Hellowell's (Chief Constable of West Yorkshire) appearance on Panorama when he said "people are not being honest about the positive side of drugs, that drugs do give people a good feeling. A 'buzz' they call it"

By contrast in the US the administration has created a 'War on Drugs' that echos the Prohibition (alcohol ban) of the 1920's. Instead of moonshine and speakeasy's this time it's cocaine and crack houses. The jails have been filled with 'drug offenders' and repressive laws introduced

Some US states give longer mandatory sentences for the possession of marijuana than for rape or even murder. Forfeiture laws allow the confiscation of property that is in any way related to drugs and last year more property was seized by this method than was stolen in burglary in the whole of the US. Recently a law was being introduced that would mean possession of huge quantities of marijuana (60,000 Kg) would carry the death penalty!

In the US, the War on Drugs (WoD) plays a considerable number of other functions. It is used as a pretext for invasions and interference in other countries, most notably the invasion of Panama. It is used to explain away inner city poverty, unemployment and homelessness as being the fault of those effected.

It's a mechanism for official racism, such laws are enforced disproportionately against Blacks. Drugs with a higher ratio of Black users receive mandatory sentences for far smaller amounts. The Crack/Cocaine ratio, for instance, is 1:100. It has seen the introduction of some of the most draconian police powers and many deaths due to police raids, sometimes of 'innocent' people in cases of mistaken identity.

FUN & PLAY

Drugs are a leisure activity, nothing more and nothing less. Some people like football, some drinking, some smoking hash and many a combination. If a newspaper ran an article discussing whether football made you a worse person we'd all get a good laugh. But it's not funny, huge numbers of mostly young, mostly working class people are criminalised and even jailed every year for engaging in this leisure time activity. Many more are harassed by the police on the same pretext, drugs are on par with 'terrorism' when it comes to giving the police extra powers to stop, search and question you.

But drugs are bad for you, don't they kill people and lead to crime? The accompanying table shows Marijuana which is very illegal was not credited with causing one death in the U.S. in 1990. Of course the fact that it is illegal makes it more difficult to measure indirect deaths due to cancers than for tobacco but most medical research seems to indicate that the health effects of

hash smoking come well behind alcohol or tobacco. Hash is the soft end of the argument, other drugs do kill people.

MDMA (Ecstasy) has recently been the source of many scare stories. People have died in Britain and Ireland from heat exhaustion or hypoallergenic responses to MDMA. But again let us consider that we are talking about a leisure activity. Rock climbing which involves far smaller numbers of people, thousands rather than millions, has killed a comparable amount in the same time period.

Yet as far as I know no-one has called for the police to arrest rock climbers and raid sporting shops. Indeed the emphasis is on making this leisure activity safer, making sure people are prepared and improving the equipment. One of the major problems with MDMA is one of quality control, because it's illegal you don't know what exactly you are buying. There is a list of similar drugs which have led directly or indirectly to deaths or other serious medical problems including LSD and speed. Our attitude to them should be shaped in a similar way.

DR DEATH

Finally there are those drugs that at the moment are the cause of enormous amounts of suffering and deaths. In Ireland heroin is the only significant one of these and it is dealt with elsewhere in this issue. Heroin is different not just because of the suffering junkies inflict on themselves but also because of the suffering they inflict on their local community as they rob and mug to obtain money.

We are not going to call for the de-criminalisation of heroin dealing any more than other anti-social crimes like arson or rape. But don't think the police are the answer, their main role is controlling rather than protecting ordinary people and in Dublin, at least, they have worked with big dealers in the past. There was almost no police response to the heroin epidemic of the early 1980's until the formation of Concerned Parents Against Drugs. This despite the fact that the main dealers, the Dunnes, were referred to in the evening papers. When CPAD evicted one of the big dealers, 'Ma Baker' it was claimed that they found an address book with home phone numbers of Drug Squad detectives in it.

On top of this, even when the police are (selectively) serious it has disastrous consequences. In the U.S. the attempt by the state to ban all drugs has pushed profits up for criminals to the point where vicious wars are being fought over controlling the supply. In Washington which has the highest murder rate it's estimated that 80% of murders are related to drugs.

Possession of small amounts of all drugs should be de-criminalised. Anti-social drugs like heroin should be available on prescription from doctors at low cost to prevent junkies turning to crime to finance their habit. What is needed is a real debate on the control of the other drugs. It seems reasonable to say that the maximum of restrictions should be similar to those applying in relation to drink or tobacco and this should be medically based and enforced rather than state controlled.

We need to wake up to the fact that the current state ban on certain drugs is unacceptable. Even in relation to truly dangerous drugs it is counter-productive. There is no room for moralism on this as the drug bans are serious attacks on people and destroy many lives, either directly through criminalisation or indirectly through drug ban related crime. The future society we are

seeking to create will, I hope, have a bit more to offer than an evangelical heaven of socialist hymn singing and hard work.

U.S. SURGEON GENERAL'S ACTUARIAL INFORMATION

This is a list of deaths by substance for 1990

Tobacco.....	360,000	[legal]
Alcohol.....	130,000	[legal]
Prescribed drugs.....	18,675	[legal]
Caffeine.....	5,800	[legal]
Cocaine.....	2,390	[illegal]
Heroin.....	2,147	[illegal]
Aspirin.....	986	[legal]
Marijuana.....	0	[illegal]

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