



Dalgarno
INSTITUTE

Media Release

Date: April 2012



Issue: *'Drug Legalisation is a Policy in Search of a Disaster'*

[*"Permissibility, availability and accessibility - all increase consumption."* Dalgarno Institute.]

Prof Neil McKeganey - Director Centre for Drug Misuse Research Scotland and author of "Controversies in Drugs Policy and Practice". Macmillan 2011.

The proposal to legalise illegal drugs is a policy in search of a disaster. This is a policy that is often called for by well-meaning middle class professionals who live their lives many miles from the communities that have been most affected by the problem of illegal drugs. It is a call that one rarely hears from those living cheek by jowl with the drugs problem. When those people speak what one hears most often is not the call to make drugs more available in their community but to make them less available and for protection against the drugs trade not a green light to its further extension.

Drug abuse is not like a social cancer, it is a social cancer. There is nothing that so profoundly harms individuals, destroys families, and tears the heart out of communities as drug abuse. The fear that ones own children will become involved with illegal drugs is the fear that stalks every parent and the reality, when that happens, is every parent's worst nightmare. When the drug addict in the family is the parent then nobody, other than the children involved, know the heartbreak that brings, the lonely nights of utter despair, of fear, silence unending neglect and the dull realisation that nobody is coming to help. When a child becomes dependent upon illegal drugs you see the relationships within the family torn apart as parents are eaten up by their sense of fear, recrimination, guilt and frustration. Brothers and sisters find themselves in a world where their own needs are totally eclipsed by the single-minded focus on the addict child. And every night is a long drawn out trial waiting for the knock on the door that tells the parent that their child has been found dead from a drugs overdose.

In the face of the unending nightmare that is drug addiction we have the repeated calls to legalise illegal drugs. Those arguments are deeply flawed and profoundly risky. We are told that the war on drugs has failed because drug abuse continues in countries across the world, and that we need now to explore the alternatives of legalisation. Claiming that the war on drugs has failed because drugs abuse continues makes about as much sense as saying that the laws against murder have failed because homicide continues in every country across the world. We have the laws against murder not to eradicate murder from our societies but to express in the clearest possible terms that murder is wrong and that when it occurs those who murder should expect to be punished.

But why do we even think that the war on drugs has failed. Indeed the notion of a war on drugs is unbelievably crass- it is a straw man used by those who wish to see the legalisation of illegal drugs. What we have in most countries across the world is not a war on drugs but a policy that combines treatment, prevention and drug enforcement. Those who recommend legalising drugs want to see the role of enforcement diluted and much greater emphasis on drugs treatment. That would be fine if we had effective treatments for drug addiction but we do not. What we have instead are doctors telling us that the best they can offer is life-long methadone for those who become addicted to illegal drugs. It is ironic that some of the most ardent supporters of legalisation in Australia are the very same doctors who are the most ardent supporters of the harm reduction policy of prescribing methadone to heroin addicts.

We are often told that the policy of drugs legalisation would enable the government to make hundreds of millions in tax revenue; raking in the profits presently enjoyed by the criminal gangs running the drugs trade. The idea of governments across the world trading in some of the most addictive substances on the planet is a grotesque image. But the advocates of legalisation will tell you we already have that in the tobacco and the alcohol industries whose taxes swell the exchequers across the world. And of course they are right but do we really want to extend that misery? And what would we be spending all that money on other than more and more treatment for those who had become addicted?

Those who support the legalisation of illegal drugs now find themselves turning with increasing enthusiasm to the situation in Portugal where since 2002 all drugs have been legalised. But drugs legalisation in Portugal has not been the unquestioned success that many would have us believe. From 2003 to 2009 Portugal has seen a 2% increase in recorded crime, a 3% increase in murders, a 4% increase in drug trafficking, and an 18% increase in robberies.

Aside from those statistics it is very dangerous for countries across the globe to replicate what has happened in one place on the basis that it offers them a template to pursue similar policies in their own area. Within the UK we were recently led down the road of 24-hour a day alcohol sales on the basis that this would enable our country to adopt a Mediterranean style café culture that would effectively tackle our legendary alcohol problem. What that policy has delivered instead is a night-time economy of alcohol fuelled harm, chaos, violence and criminality from which our country is now reeling. We now have politicians struggling to reverse a policy they should never have implemented in the first place.

But suppose for one minute that Australia followed the enthusiastic counsel of Dr Alex Wodak and others who favour legalisation. What you would have is either heroin for sale in your local pharmacy, which most people would not support, or doctors given responsibility for prescribing the drug to those who want to use it. In the face of such government sponsored heroin prescribing it is hard to imagine that the existing criminal gangs would simply pack up their bags and move into some other area of illegal activity. What they would do instead is seek to undermine the government regulated scheme by vigorous promotion of their own drug dealing networks. Faced with that competition the government would find itself back where it started - only this time they would be fighting not to eradicate the drugs trade but to control it.

Legalisation of illegal drugs is a policy heavily promoted by those who see it as delivering a liberal nirvana in which everybody gets the high they desire and nobody pays the price for other peoples' pleasure. We need to ask ourselves though what are the positives of using illegal drugs? In what way does drug abuse actually benefit society, strengthen individuals, and enliven communities? If the fight against illegal drugs is long and costly and may never be won that is not a reason to give up but to continue in the face of that challenge because the alternative of widespread drug abuse is a liberal nightmare not a liberal heaven.

What we are now seeing in laboratories across the globe is the production of new legal high drugs whose effects mimic the illegal drugs but whose chemistry is subtly different to take these drugs outside the realm of law enforcement. We are facing new challenges in relation to a drugs trade that is chasing profits with little regard for the harms that are caused. The response on the part of government cannot be to provide a green light to the drugs trade but to do all it can to reduce the scale of that problem. To provide treatment, prevention, and vigorous enforcement and to set aside the counsel of those who, for whatever reason, are happy to see drug use proliferate in our communities.

Neil McKeganey - CDMR Director

www.drugmisuseresearch.org

Allison Brown: Communications Liaison -
Dalgarno Institute 0400 984 288

Dalgarno Institute

admin@dalgarnoinstitute.org.au

P: 1300 975 002 F: 1300 952 551



Dalgarno
INSTITUTE



www.dalgarnoinstitute.org.au www.nobrainier.org.au