



THE ENCOD BULLETIN ON DRUG POLICY IN EUROPE

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DRUGS AND DEMOCRACY

To change drug policies in Europe we need political initiatives. According to the rules of representative democracy, these changes will have to be proposed and approved by parliaments and then adopted by governments. This means that people who wish to bring an end to the war on drugs need to find a way to influence politicians, so they start acting in favour of a more sensible approach. In view of the huge failures of current drug policies, that should not be too difficult. However, stigmatisation is an effective weapon. Few politicians wish to be known for maintaining a 'soft' line on drugs, as they fear this will surely make them lose votes. Instead they prefer to keep silent, and the war on drugs becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

In the absence of a real political debate on drugs, most people never reflect on the issue, and instead base their opinion on ignorance and fear. They associate drug problems with the substances themselves, and do not (want to) realise that many, perhaps most of these problems are caused by the fact that drugs are prohibited. Instead they think prohibition is the only way to avoid these problems. As a result, those who challenge the current status quo are seen as extremists.

Meanwhile, lively debates on how to improve drug policies are taking place in conferences throughout the world and on the Internet. Civil servants, experts and lobbyists of different kinds meet each other in different settings, exchange experiences and opinions and, in the best case, try to create some kind of common ground. But as long as this debate does not reach the parliaments, nothing that is being said has any effective influence at all on the direction that future policies will take.

Even when this debate finally reaches the parliaments, and leads to decisions that change the fundamental principles of the war on drugs, governments always find ways to ignore them. Since 2000, three motions have been approved in the Dutch parliament that ask for experiments with a controlled legalisation of the cultivation of cannabis for commercial and recreational purposes (currently representing an illegal industry of between 1 and 4 billion EURO/year). Yet the government refuses to carry out this mandate, maintaining that this would isolate the country from the rest of Europe.

Then in December 2004, the European Parliament approved recommendations for a fundamental change in EU drug policies. Among the recommendations was one to allow for experiments such as the one that was suggested in the Netherlands.

Here the answer (of the European Commission) is that the recommendations cannot be taken into account, as the EU Member States are autonomous in their drug policies.

Without direct political pressure to act, authorities will always be able to get away with their own interpretations of democratic rules in order to avoid the real choices in drug policy. The drug issue is symbolic for the fact that we are living in a half-democracy, in which it is rather difficult for citizens to play an active role in the decision-making process other than voting once every 4 or 5 years and hoping that the people who have been elected will sincerely look for the best solutions to deal with society's problems.

So who are the citizens who may act politically to repeal drug prohibition?

Those who ought to be most interested to act, drug consumers, are often weakened by internal division ("my drug is better than yours"), by the amount of daily problems they are facing, or - perhaps - exactly by the lack of them. Most drug consumers in Europe do not have much of a problem finding their desired products on the black market. However, there are big disadvantages to this situation, and if consumers would like to get rid of these, they will need to associate and stand up for their rights.

Professionals in the drug field, those who have to find daily solutions for social exclusion, but also the experts who analyse the drug phenomenon, should have enough reasons to challenge the current status quo as well. As they are often dependent on subsidies coming from above, they will always be cautious not to rock the boat too hard. However, diplomacy in the drug issue has its limits: one cannot keep chasing mice when there is an elephant in the room called drug prohibition.

Entrepreneurs working in the grey zone that has been created by the decriminalisation of certain drugs (mostly cannabis) are a third group that will benefit from an end to the drug war. As in the case of the consumers, many of them have evolved in the current situation and feel no immediate need to change it. However, as we have seen in the Netherlands, a grey zone does not give any guarantees for the future. The long-term perspectives of the sector can only be ensured by some form of legal regulation.

And finally, the activists. They are a threatened species, for it seems impossible to continue working almost voluntarily for the good causes for a long time. Political activism, it seems, remains the domain of young idealists and of those who have a steady income and just wish to spend time and energy contributing to making right what they have learned to see as wrong throughout their lives.

Even with a small infrastructure, ENCOD tries to combine the energies of the representatives of these four categories who are willing to support political initiatives. The lack of financial stability must be compensated with lots of idealism. Sometimes this idealism gets overheated, such as the initiative of some ENCOD members in the Netherlands (including the undersigned) in April to establish a new political party with legalisation of cannabis as its major purpose. The initiative turned out to be not much more than a provocative thought, but at least that is more than nothing.

For the moment, our role will be limited to giving signals: in a conference on European drug policy in the European Parliament in the autumn of 2006, through the dialogue with EU authorities that is bound to start in 2007 and in mobilisations towards the UN Meeting in Vienna 2008. Meanwhile, with the help of all ENCOD members, the Freedom to Farm message is slowly extending to the European public opinion.

All these issues will be on the table during the forthcoming General Assembly of ENCOD, on 23 to 25 June in Antwerpen. Please contact me if you would be interested to attend.

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