

THE ENCOD BULLETIN

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DRUG PROHIBITION IN DEFENCE MODE

The war on drugs is quickly approaching the date on which the last shreds of its credibility it still maintains among the general public will expire. What is happening around Europe these days demonstrates the moral crisis within authorities and others who wish to maintain prohibition as the basis for drug policies. They are increasingly showing signs of weakness. Instead of producing arguments that would prove to the world the benefits of drug prohibition, supporters of the war on drugs avail themselves of blackmail and defamation, or demonstrate an arrogance typical of those whose cherished notions are being threatened by reality. Conditions for drug policy reformers to move forward improve.

Europe, February 2005. Thirty years have passed since the possession and distribution of small quantities of cannabis were decriminalised in the Netherlands. Virtually all European cities make clean needles available to injecting drug users. Consumption rooms are becoming a fully integrated instrument of official policies in more and more countries. The same with facilities for pill testing. These and other measures, all known under the broad banner of Harm Reduction, have not only saved thousands of lives and improved many more: in fact, they alone are the cause of the only positive results that can be presented by drug policy officials in their evaluation reports, like those of the European Monitoring Centre on Drugs and Drug Addiction.

The importance of harm reduction in preventing infections, mortality and drug problems in general is broadly recognised. In some ways, it has even become a palliative to keep prohibition alive by giving it a more human face. Many harms related to drug production, distribution and consumption, especially those caused by the fact that drugs are illegal, continue unchallenged. However, questioning the legitimacy of Harm Reduction would be extremely unwise. Still, that was the purpose of the visit of Bobby Charles, a high level representative of the US State Department's International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, to Mr. Antonio Maria Costa, Executive Director of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime on 10 November last year. Charles told Costa to make sure the UNODC would continue to oppose harm reduction. Since the United States is one of the major donors to the UNODC (together with Sweden and Italy) Costa quickly understood the message. The next day he promised Charles in a letter <<http://www.encod.org/letundcp.htm>> that Harm Reduction will not make its way into the official UN discourse.

Of course, the US intervention is a foreseeable denunciation of all those governments which have been applying harm reduction measures for an entire generation now and believe in its effectiveness. Much more concerning is the fact that the UNODC, still the world's most prominent authority on drug control, is willing to sacrifice common sense if it is put under political and financial pressure, no matter how many people will die from the consequences.

Accusing their opponents is another way in which supporters of drug prohibition try to defend their cause. UNODC director Antonio Costa calls people who question drug prohibition "pro-drug activists, who are becoming part of the drug problem". Others, like the Scandinavian NGOs Hassela Nordic Network (HNN) or Europe Against Drugs (EURAD), describe drug policy reformers as conspirators who are all funded by billionaire George Soros. This argument was used by the Chairperson of EURAD, Graine Kenny, in a conference last September in Oslo, Norway, an effort to convince the local authorities that opening a safe consumption room in their city would make Norway fall prey to George Soros' global legalisation strategy. On 1 February 2005, the first safe consumption room in Scandinavia was opened in Oslo. Injecting drug users can make use of the facility 6 hours a day.

Finally, disrespect is the newest form in which authorities try to avoid the dialogue with those who argue for drug policy reform. In early February, the UK's new Home Secretary Charles Clark refused an invitation of the Legalise Cannabis Alliance to speak at an event about the medical benefits of cannabis in Clark's own electoral district of Norwich, saying he had "no respect for the LCA or it's members". Well, at least he is being honest to his fellow citizens, some of whom might even have voted for him in the last elections.

On the other hand, some European authorities are trying to find a rational way out of the current dilemma of laws that do not reflect reality as long as the basis for international drug legislation, the UN Conventions on Drugs, has not been up to revision. Apart from the good news from Oslo, encouraging steps were taken by the Polish Minister of Health, Marek Balicki, who presented in early January a proposal to decriminalise drug consumption. One month later, the Belgian authorities decriminalised the personal use of cannabis: from the first of February 2005, in the heart of the European Union, you can grow 1 plant and have 3 grammes of cannabis in your possession without fearing legal consequences.

And of course there are other positive initiatives that can become seeds of hope. Such is the case of the decision by the Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs of the European Parliament to organise a Public Hearing on EU Drug Policies on 21 April, in order to influence on the elaboration process of a new European Commission Action Plan On Drugs (2005 to 2009). The purpose of this hearing is to enable both civil society representatives and authorities to discuss the integration of evidence-based insights in future EU drug policies. It should be seen as the follow-up on the reform-friendly Catania report that was approved in the European Parliament in December.

Millions of European citizens who consume forbidden substances or care for the impact of the drug issue on society are being held hostage by laws and policies whose justification is dubious, illegitimate and harm-producing. The nature of the purported benefits of prohibition is such that the general public somehow is not allowed to know about them. On the other hand, the harms of prohibition are no longer limited to the field of health. Drug prohibition has an impact on the food security, environment and economy of many nations, and in terms of public safety, affects every citizen of the world.

So while it becomes increasingly difficult to defend the current status quo, the fight for different drug policies continues to be the responsibility of a tiny group of people who are very susceptible to efforts to discredit them. Drug policy reformers have the potential of growing from a single-issue-network related to people living in the margins of global society into a social movement for change that reaches far beyond its immediate goals. Reformers need to get organised, and that is what ENCOD is trying to achieve.

In february ENCOD proposed to all the different European NGO networks involved in the drug field to coordinate the involvement of civil society in the hearing in the European Parliament in April. Unfortunately, the two main funding agencies working on this issue, Open Society Institute and NEF/ Senlis Council, did not show interest and the proposal failed. We also approach the hemp related industry suggesting them to play a more active role - for instance by organising a hemp fair in Vienna during the days of the CND Meeting in one of the coming years. This could help attract people to a new international demonstration at the UN Headquarters. And we contribute to making Saturday May 7, 2005, the Day of the Million Marijuana March, a worldwide event to spread the seeds of hope for a different drug policy. Finally we continue to look for VIPs who may support us, and we count on your support in spreading the word on ENCOD so people can become a member or subscriber to our monthly newsletter.

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