

THE ENCOD BULLETIN ON DRUG POLICY IN EUROPE

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THE SNOW BALL IS ROLLING

At a time where European citizens are called to express themselves on a new European Constitution, the drugs debate is one of those where it is becoming increasingly clear that the current lack of democracy in Europe is the key obstacle to the efforts which are trying to make the dream of a unified Europe based on humanitarian values come true. In drug policy making, democracy does not exist: authorities ignore statistics and evaluations, avoid public discussion and hide the disastrous consequences of their policies for public health, safety and expenditure. Drugs are a social taboo, but authorities use them to create a political taboo too, a useful tool to justify repression of millions of citizens.

The springtime of 2005 proves to be fertile for drug policy reform initiatives. The petition campaign organised by ENCOD in support of the reform-friendly Catania report on drugs that was approved last December in the European Parliament has collected more than 40.000 signatures in one month. By comparison: on the website that was installed by the European Commission between July and November 2004 to collect comments from the public on the new EU Drug Strategy, no more than 35 responses were received.

The campaign, as well as the lobby efforts that led to the Catania report, is organised by activists working voluntarily all over Europe to express the voice of the people who wish an end to the war on drugs and hope that the European Union will become a space where alternative policies can be developed and implemented. In Hungary, activists from the Hemp Seed Association have started a Civil Obedience Movement that seeks to point out the glaring injustice of strict drug laws with mass surrender of drug users, that is, being obedient to the law. Among others a 65 old year grandmother turned herself in to the police as she has been smoking cannabis for 40 years.

Of course authorities do not always wait for people to show up themselves, as daily razzias in private houses, on streets, schools or party places continue in many different places in Europe. In Italy, the government of Silvio Berlusconi is proposing a new bill on drugs which cancels the decriminalization law approved by a 1993 referendum and re-introduces heavy prison penalties for all consumers, regardless of whether the used drug is cocaine, marijuana or heroin. The slogan is: "No matter what the harm, all illegal drugs are to be considered equal", thus resuming the classical stigmatizing ethical state approach of the ancient fascist regime.

Meanwhile the debate in the Netherlands is turning in another direction. The national government shares the same ideological background as the Italian, but on a local level, authorities start to wake up to reality. In the past three weeks, Dutch media have not ceased to report on the absurd war on hemp cultivators in the Southern province of Limburg. In this province many coffeeshops are located, since it is attracting tourists from Germany, Belgium, Luxembourg and France, and many people fall for the temptation to provide these shops with homegrown cannabis.

The media attention has been caused among others by declarations of the lord mayors of the most involved Limburg cities, Maastricht and Heerlen, saying they are in favour of a regulation of the backdoor of the coffeeshop, that is production of cannabis. These lord mayors belong to the same party (Christen-Democratisch Appel) as the Dutch Minister of Justice Donner. Minister Donner is in extremely tight shoes, as he knows the Netherlands cannot afford to widen more the margin of international drug conventions it already has obtained with the coffeeshop model.

The shoes are not only tight, they are old and wasted. But as an old Dutch proverb says, 'do not throw old shoes away before you have bought new ones'. Taking into account Donner's dilemma, it is clear that the new shoes should be European. Only in a European forum will the Netherlands obtain understanding for the argument that drug policies need to be decentralised, that a recognition of the diverse character of drug policies is needed in stead of a uniform religion called prohibition.

On 21 April, the Maastricht lord mayor Gerd Leers was one of the speakers on the Public Hearing organised by the European Parliament Committee of Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs, in order to discuss the new EU Drugs Action Plan. He could not have chosen a better opportunity for expressing his ideas, whereas the room was filled with representatives of civil society organisations from allover Europe who not only supported them, but would like to have them implemented for all substances that are currently illegal.

In return, the political representative of the European Union, Health Minister Mars di Bartolomeo of Luxembourg said that drugs needed a pluralistic approach, while the European Commission's representative, Carel Edwards, could only conclude that there exists no consensus among European countries.

At the end of the hearing, ENCOD representatives offered a peacepipe to Carel Edwards, a gesture sponsored by the German company ROOR. In the coming weeks, we hope to increase the pressure on the Commission to start adapting the new Action Plan, that will be released in June 2005, to the needs of civil society. You can support this by signing the petition at <http://action.encod.org> or becoming a member or suscriber to ENCOD. For more information, please contact us.

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