

THE ENCOD BULLETIN ON DRUG POLICY IN EUROPE

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THE ESCAPE FROM REALITY

Now that the French have said NO to the new European Constitution, and the Dutch will probably do the same on Wednesday 1 June, the road towards more integration inside the European Union will take longer, but it will continue. The debate on the EU Constitution is a fake one. Whatever the feelings about this Constitution and its consequences are, the question if it will be approved or not has very little effect on the real important problems that face Europe and its citizens today, such as the issue of drugs.

Away from the attention of media and politicians, the European Union has huge problems finding the right approach to drugs. The EU establishment talks about humanitarian and social values, but it has been unable to ensure its people their basic citizen rights, among others the right to health. Therefore, no matter what happens in the coming years, the essential belief that drug policy needs to be fundamentally reformed is spreading throughout Europe.

It is not necessary to have a Constitution in order to collaborate and compare, and through this, authorities in Europe are slowly learning that the war on drugs is a failure not only in their own country, but elsewhere too. No further political integration is needed to enable citizens from all corners of Europe to unite and fight to obtain their rights, not only for themselves, but for all people on the planet. We are only at the beginning of this movement, and as they say in Polish, at the beginning, anything seems better than nothing.

Lord Mayor Leers of the Dutch city of Maastricht already understands how the new Europe works. Tired of receiving a negative response from the Dutch national government to his suggestion to regulate the local cultivation of cannabis, motivated as always by the statement that this step would be unacceptable for the European neighbours, Leers has turned towards his colleagues of Aachen (in Germany) and Liege (in Belgium). On a Conference held in Maastricht on 20 May, the three lord mayors have launched a common proposal that calls for closer regional cooperation on an experiment with strictly regulated and certified cannabis growing. If this proposal becomes reality (we will get the first indications of that in the autumn of 2005) the region of Limburg, where Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands meet, will become home to the first global experiment of legalisation of a drug that is prohibited by the UN Conventions.

The Netherlands re-appears to be the country where drug policy reform is in an advanced stage. In support of Leers and his colleagues, Dutch Minister Pechtold, responsible for Administrative Innovation, declared himself in favour of the legalisation in Europe of "cannabis boulevards", areas outside the city centre where people could buy and enjoy cannabis. On the other hand, it is also in Holland where customs at Schiphol airport early April confiscated a package containing 5.000 bags of cocaine, ordered by ENCOD from a completely legal and established Bolivian tea company.

Cocaleaves have been consumed in South America for more than 7.000 years, and never has any proof been produced of harmful effects on the fysical and mental health. All efforts to eliminate or reduce coca cultivation have failed, basically because the coca growers themselves were never involved in these efforts. The prohibition of cocaleaves serves no other interests than that of the United States, as it is used as a justification for maintaining US military and political control on the region.

ENCOD is preparing a trial against the Dutch State in order to release the cocatea and enable European citizens to have access to this healthy product while supporting a peaceful solution to the war on drugs in Bolivia, Colombia and Peru. It will be interesting to have the verdict of a Dutch judge on the question if cocatea should remain illegal, when the reason it was forbidden in the first place does not have any scientific basis. It will also be fascinating to compare the ingredients of coca tea with those of Coca-Cola (which is also made from coca leaves), and find out the truth about that 'secret formula' that entangled the world for more than a century.

The truth has always been the most crucial among the many victims of the war on drugs. One of those who paid the price for speaking the truth is Ricardo Soberón, a Peruvian lawyer specialised in drug legislation. On 13 April, Soberón was about to publish his new book "Laws, Justice and Drugs", written on request of the University of Maryland. But few days before the presentation took place, the US Embassy in Lima intervened, confiscating all but ten copies of the book as they were leaving the printery. The sole justification that came out of the Embassy was that "national political interests of the US" were at stake.

Finally a word about ENCODs future. As we lack funding to guarantee decent working conditions for its staff members, we have started a fundraising campaign that needs to solve the most urgent necessities. Among others, ENCOD is preparing a concrete proposal for sponsors that we hope to find among the European cannabis industry. In the end of May, we also met with the staff of the Anti-drugs Co-ordination Unit of the European Commission in Brussels. This in fact was the occasion for a dialogue with the Commission that we have been trying to obtain since August 2004, in order to discuss the involvement of civil society in the new EU Action Plan on Drugs (2005-2008) that will be officially announced in the end of June.

In the meeting, we were surprised to hear that the European Commission actually agrees with us that a transparant consultation process in which civil society could express itself on European drug policy is urgently needed. The EC representatives even said that working together with ENCOD would result in a win-win situation. However, we were told that before 2007, the Commission would have no possibilities to co-operate with civil society, as there is no budget foreseen for such an activity. When asked if the new European Constitution would do anything to shorten the procedures of Brussel's surrealistic bureaucracy, they smiled and said that it would not. So there you see.

ENCOD needs to survive, at least until 2007. Please visit <http://action.encod.org/support> to find out how you could support us.

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