

THE ENCOD BULLETIN ON DRUG POLICY IN EUROPE

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FREEDOM TO FARM (for Mo Mowlam)

The fact that certain drugs have become the objects of social taboo poses multiple problems for those who use them, as stigmatisation can have serious consequences for career and private life. The legal sanction forces most producers, dealers and consumers of drugs to hide an important part of their personality and live a kind of double life, something which can, in and of itself, have damaging implications both for those directly involved and for wider society. However, it is the political taboo that is most harmful to society as a whole.

The political taboo consists of an implicit ban on any serious debate on the pros and cons of drug prohibition in the decision-making structures. Most politicians tend to rely on information from a mass media that is fed by (inter)national authorities responsible for law enforcement. On the rare occasions when politicians do consider drug related health or social problems, they simply overlook the fact that most of these problems are produced by current drug policies.

Due to this political taboo, no matter how much evidence points to the massive failures of the war on drugs, the current prosecution of that war continues unchallenged. On the contrary, on official UN meetings on drugs, it is the harm reduction approaches such as needle exchange that are challenged. If it were left to the legal apparatus, such interventions may continue to play a part in the technical toolbox available to deal with visible drug related damage, but never will they be allowed to become the foundation of a new way of conceiving the global drug phenomenon and how to deal with it.

In this climate, only very few politicians are brave enough to advocate the legalisation of drugs. One of them was former UK Cabinet minister on Northern Ireland Mo Mowlam, who died on 19 August 2005, at the age of 55. If there is anything we can learn from Mo, it is precisely her courage, honesty and optimism. In 2000, as head of the government's anti-drugs campaign, Mowlam openly admitted to have smoked cannabis and "unlike President Clinton, I did inhale".

Five years ago, it seemed as if European debate on drug policy was opening up. As a result of increasing awareness of the drugs phenomenon and the fear of the spread of HIV/AIDS, the acceptance of illicit drug consumption as a part of modern society was spreading amongst health workers in these fields across almost all Western European nations. Most European governments began to issue special decrees to allow regional and local authorities to experiment with more liberal approaches. European citizens were slowly becoming used to the presence of safe injection rooms in their cities, the smell of cannabis on their streets, and a greater recognition of the fact that their own children's experimentation with drugs did not necessarily spell disaster.

Then came September 11, 2001, and although there are more and more serious doubts about the official version on what happened that day, it is clear for everybody that the attacks have served to abrogate civil liberties and step up the war rhetoric against external enemies, blaming them for problems whose real cause is internal. No serious thought has ever been given to peaceful ways that authorities can use to fight terrorism, such as the legalisation of the drugs market, a step which would dry up a

considerable source of money for terrorist groups. National security has returned to the top of the list of political priorities, and it is interesting to note some of the dangers that, according to legal authorities at least, this security is suddenly threatened by.

On 30 July 2005, the Czech police brutally intervened against a techno party in the Tachov region. It was the 12th time that this yearly event had been held, and the first time it encountered any legal problems. Likewise, several techno and dance events throughout Europe reported similar problems; this summer dancing is rapidly becoming a crime.

Also at the end of July, Marc Emery, cannabis activist and seed seller from Vancouver, Canada, was arrested following a demand for extradition from the US Government. The offence for which the US wants Emery (the sale of hemp seeds) is not a criminal offence in Canada at all. However, as the US Drugs Enforcement Administration spokesperson openly admitted, the real reason the US wants Emery is to put an end to his sponsoring of the movement for marijuana legalisation in North America, which, in a dangerous precedent, they describe as 'money laundering'.

In Europe, the harm reduction movement was a response to the health problems posed by drug policies in the 1990s. Today's challenges require another approach. The permanent and intrinsic counterproductiveness of the prohibition approach – even in the light of its own declared objectives – today must be countered in terms of its impact on humanitarian and democratic values. Defence of the fundamental human right to alter one's own consciousness by the use of plants and compounds should become the basis for a new global drug policy reform movement. All adult citizens of the world should be allowed to exercise this right so long as they do no harm to those around them.

Defending the right to grow, possess and use substances for mind-altering purposes goes further than harm reduction. It will require non-repressive regulations to assure 'fair play' between producers and consumers in the global drugs chain. As such, the drug policy reform proposal could be integrated in a movement striving for a global society based on ensuring minimal conditions for all inhabitants of the earth to live a decent life and be protected against the effects of unnecessary criminalisation, marginalisation and stigmatisation. This implies taking a stand against drug prohibition as such, which has proven over and over again to be not only an ineffective and non-humane approach, but also the cause of immense collateral damage to people and societies.

In September ENCOD will launch a new campaign, based on the slogan "Freedom to Farm", aimed at mobilising people behind the proposal to legalize the cultivation of drug-related plants, as a first element in the fundamental reform of drug policy. Likewise, our immediate objective is to obtain space for a debate on the need to safeguard European drug policy from being dismantled even more. Here, we count on the collaboration of local authorities and politicians who are, like Mo Mowlam, brave enough to take up the issue in a serious way. In the longer term, our aim is to isolate those forces who, defending vested interests, refuse to admit that prohibition is the worst way to solve drug problems. As with all taboos, their power will diminish as awareness increases.

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