

The Cannabis Row 1 - Mo And The Drugs Tsar Both Tell The Truth. Others Don't

Written by Polly Toynbee
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Opinion

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Drugs in Britain: special report
Polly Toynbee

The Tories announced their new drugs policy yesterday. Like all their current policies it is piece of sheer cynicism, likely to appeal to the only voters they already have in the bag - elderly reactionaries and the rightwing press. The Tory frontbenchers are not especially deficient in brains, but they are so desperate that even at their most opportunistic they have lost any sense of what might fly. There can hardly be a person under 50, parent or youth, who will not read their new proposals with incredulity: possession of drugs within 400 metres of a school would lead to a prison sentence. Anyone convicted of supplying a class A drug (including ecstasy) to a minor for the second time would receive a life sentence. (Life!) Supplying a class B drug (cannabis) for the third time would get a seven-year sentence.

This is a rapid response to Mo Mowlam and drugs tsar Keith Hellawell's recent sensible remarks about depenalising cannabis. William Hague says: "A Conservative government will move in the opposite direction. Not more tolerance of drugs, but less. Not softer policing, but tougher enforcement. Not making excuses, but locking up offenders." He promised to "crack down hard on the drug trade. The small-time drug-pushers who presently get lenient sentences will find under our government that leniency has run out for them".

What is the government's response to Mr Hague's nonsense? Panic. Yesterday they called Leah Betts's anti-drug campaigning parents in to Number 10 and forced Mo Mowlam and Keith Hellawell to meet them and eat their words loudly and humbly. Hellawell used that lowest of ploys: "I was misquoted" (why not sue?). Mo Mowlam came out of Downing Street and said tersely, but without direct recantation, "Our policy hasn't changed, but we believe it should be a combination of tough on drugs but also treatment and education. That is our policy."

This is crude spin at its most despicable. This is government not by what works, but by what the papers say. Time and again whenever anyone in power who actually knows anything about drugs dares tell a truth that is blindingly obvious, all politicians feel obliged to step out and lie brazenly. They say what they quite plainly cannot believe and then they call for focus groups to find out why the young and a growing number of others so despise politics and politicians that they no longer bother to vote.

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Although large numbers of cannabis possession cases are quietly shelved with a caution these days, 500 people a year still go to prison for possessing small amounts for their own use and 1,950 are jailed for other cannabis-related offences - still more than for any other drug. The government spends pounds 1.4bn on dealing with drugs, two thirds of it spent on courts and prison while only one third goes towards treatment, though an extra pounds 250m over three years is now being put into treatment programmes. Too slowly and too quietly Keith Hellawell has been surveying his pilot programmes for effective ways of reducing the most frightening anti-social aspects of drug taking: a third of property crime is caused by people raising money to feed their addiction - pounds 20,000 a year to feed a heroin habit. Pilot schemes show how every pound spent on treatment programmes saves pound 3 in crime. Half the addicts sent to treatment programmes instead of prison have succeeded in giving up drugs, the other half at least use less and commit fewer crimes than before. Of course he knows what everyone else knows - cannabis is not a social problem and it is a huge waste of police, court and prison resources trying to stamp it out. But if he ever says so, he has to eat his words.

An EU annual report on drugs policy finds a new trend right across Europe towards policy-makers down-grading the importance of cannabis and increasingly telling their criminal justice systems not to bother with prosecution for possession. Countries are drawing a sharper distinction between possession and real traffickers. The report finds that "new legal approaches towards illicit drugs show a shift towards decriminalising consuming and possessing drugs for personal use". However "most member states reject extreme solutions - such as full legalisation or harsh

repression - but continue to prohibit drug consumption while modifying the penalties and measures applied to it". Portugal: just about to decriminalise possession for personal use. Spain: already decriminalised. France: justice ministry recommends no prosecution, just warnings. Austria, Germany, Denmark, Luxembourg: no proceedings for possession. Sweden, counselling or fines for those who refuse. Ireland: fines not prison. In Amsterdam up to five grams (a dozen cigarettes) can be purchased in coffee shops, with one month prison or fines for possessing more. UK: proceedings more often dropped or relegated to caution.

Interestingly the report notes marked ambivalence in most countries: although official policy is to stop prosecuting for possession there is often a gap between theory and practice, with police continuing to arrest. This is because none of the countries is considering formal legalisation so it is all a matter of administrative policy, as it is in Britain, with varying attitudes taken by local police and courts. A pity Downing Street didn't also summon the Humphreys who are another drug campaigning family, following their horror when their son James, a Manchester University student, was sentenced to two and half years in Strangeways for buying a handful of ecstasy pills for his flatmates.

Next month the police foundation brings out a report on drugs policy part-funded by the home office. After two years hard research by a distinguished panel including two chief constables, it is expected to suggest depenalisation of cannabis and downgrading ecstasy from a class A to a class B drug. They must have watched Downing Street's drug caper yesterday with foreboding. Never mind Jack Straw's son or the 49% of young people who have taken cannabis. Or the 75% of under 21-year-olds who think it should not be illegal. Never mind the chief constable of Cleveland who just produced a cogently realistic report comparing our drugs policy with the

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disaster of 20s prohibition in the US. (He pointed out that since the UK has higher cannabis use than the Netherlands, their policy may work best.) Whoever researches drugs comes away convinced that our soft drugs policy is at best a waste, at worst damaging. Only the politicians still swear that the moon is made of green cheese, "Just say no" works and we can win the drugs war. Education, education, education Tony Blair said. But he clearly never meant to educate voters about some of life's difficult truths.