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Editorial

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United Kingdom moves closer than ever to the decriminalisation of some controlled drugs - But is this enough?

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Reforming Britain's hard line anti-drugs policy has been a taboo subject for most politicians until very recently. And this despite the fact that Britain remains ahead of the rest of Europe on almost every kind of drug-taking according to the European Union's latest report on this topic. Then, suddenly, Home Secretary David Blunkett proposed late last year the reclassification of cannabis as a class C drug. This, in effect, meant that the country's lawmakers were asked to make the possession of cannabis a non-arrestable offence. The Home Secretary's proposals followed earlier announcements by London's Metropolitan Police in March of the same year that in the London

Borough of Lambeth people found with small amounts of cannabis would not be arrested. Instead, Police Constables were directed to confiscate the drugs involved and to allow offenders to go after issuing them with a 'formal warning'. This, as initially predicted and recently confirmed by the Metropolitan Police, saved in man-hours the equivalent of two PCs which were better used in combating more serious crime. On first examination these measures appear bold and certainly can be perceived as the most liberal reaction to cannabis in the United Kingdom since it was outlawed in 1928.

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Many of Britain's addicts attend needle exchange clinics set up around the country by governmental agencies; others register for methadone maintenance programmes in an effort to kick their heroin addiction. All of them talk about the need for a new approach to substance abuse. Britain is home to thousands of drug addicts who, when interviewed in drug addiction clinics, freely declare that their drug problem is supported by criminal activities. It is estimated that addicts in the UK spend an average of £16,500 a year each on drugs and that about 80% of it is directly financed by crime (mugging, burglary, robbery, shoplifting and car theft). This criminal activity, in turn, increases the burden on prisons and explains in part why Britain imprisons a higher proportion of its people than any other country in Western Europe - with the exception of Portugal. Some drugs lobby groups including Transform, calculate that drugs cost the UK government £10billion a year partly due to the burden on prisons.

But will the measures proposed by the UK government offer its people real solutions or are they simply experiments designed to captivate the public's imagination (and vote) through the abundant media sensationalism they unavoidably feed? One cannot help but to wonder if this is simply the new version of the old 'War on Drugs' that a former US President launched in the early 1990s and to which all UK governments happily subscribed ever since. People must not feel content with themselves for embracing such 'liberal' and 'bold' measures proposed by their supposedly socially sensitive governments. Instead, much more needs to be done before real solutions become available.

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The western world has been faced with the serious problems that substance dependence causes for decades and yet we have chosen to deal with it only in the surface and without making too many waves in order not to disturb the financial and other interests of those involved. The UK government is taking the easy way out by reclassifying the substance when the war against it cannot be won. This is surely not what people had in mind when they voted for a government with a socially sensitive policy on drugs. And it certainly offers no reassurances to an addict's parents that the drugs their child is about to buy off a street dealer will not kill him or her. It is much preferable to provide clean and safe environments for those addicted to substances to use controlled quality/strength drugs under medical supervision. If these substances were manufactured, distributed and used under the auspices of the National Health Service, we would

see a reduction in the overall cost of substance abuse in the UK. This would mainly be due to the extra income generated from the taxation of the manufacturing companies combined with the money saved by the country if addicts did not have to get involved in criminal activities to support their drug addictions.

...Few of us object to pharmaceutical companies making large profits for selling us 'prescribed' substances as long as these are quality checked, legally obtained, taxed and kept under control. Moreover, even fewer of us complain of the serious problems that alcohol and nicotine addictions cause around the globe despite the severe toxicological and socio-economic problems associated with both of them...

Few of us object to pharmaceutical companies making large profits for selling us 'prescribed' substances as long as these are quality checked, legally obtained, taxed and kept under control. Moreover, even fewer of us complain of the serious problems that alcohol and nicotine addictions cause around the globe despite the severe toxicological and socio-economic problems associated with both of them. The same attitude and policies must be extended to those substances currently classified as illegal, heroin for example. The UK government should authorise their production in clean, pharmaceutical-like environments and supervise their use in hospitals and clinics.

In this way, the quality and purity of the substance could be monitored and addicts could be reassured that they were getting exactly what they needed, accompanied by medical supervision and from an official source. The manufacturing companies would be taxed and the income generated could then be redirected into the UK national budget and used for better health and education.

It is no secret that some authoritarian governments make billions in the global illicit drug market and that there exist drug cartels that make profits equivalent or greater than the national budgets of some small countries. If we were to legalise drugs and supplied them to our people as all other pharmaceutical preparations, these cartels would go out of business and most of their illegal earnings would be potentially available to be used in our local hospitals, schools and government councils. The complete incorporation of classified drugs into national health services would see billions of pounds wiped off the bank accounts of drug cartels and redirected instead into the budgets of national departments of health from the taxation of the manufacturing companies.

The complete legalisation of classified substances would, in time, see the total destruction of the world's drug black market. This would require strong-willed politicians and health administrators with a clear vision and who would not hesitate to put the correct infrastructure in place despite the potential financial and political short-term costs.

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