



Facts and Evidence - A Case for the Eradication of Cannabis.

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INTRODUCTION

The evidence couldn't be clearer. Cannabis is a hugely damaging drug that causes misery, particularly for our poorest citizens. Our aim should be its eradication and that can never be achieved through legalised capitulation.

According to a report published last November by the Adam Smith Institute, our drug policy is: 'An embarrassment.' (Laven-Morris, 2016, para. 1) Commenting on the report, Steve Moore, Director of 'Volteface' concurred, insisting that: 'The global movement towards legalisation, regulation and taxation of cannabis is now inexorable.' (Laven-Morris, 2016, para. 16) While this supposed 'inexorability' may have political and social elites jumping for joy, it's yet another step toward greater suffering for those vulnerable individuals at risk of damage from the mind-altering drug, as well as for families and communities who are, and will increasingly, be forced to pick up the pieces.

Within this paper, I will seek to address some of the primary points of contention and concern surrounding cannabis and counter the myths and assertions propounded by ideologues, corporate lobbyists, and the liberal media, each dogmatic in their pursuit of recreational cannabis legalisation. I will conclude that the consistent application of the meaningful criminal penalties already legislatively available, aggressive and rigorous policing across the socio-economic spectrum, the use of evidence based education, conferring the real health-risks of the drug and well-funded, compassionate, abstinence-based treatment for those who have become dependent on cannabis can, deliver its eradication.

1) HARM

Forgive my scepticism, but when Richard Branson insisted that, 'most of us' could smoke skunk without it doing us 'any harm,' I was not immediately convinced. (Holehouse, 2015, para. 2)

Even if Mr Branson was right and cannabis, for most, presented no tangible health risks, this would still not be sufficient moral rationale for its legalisation. If we care about all our fellow citizens we cannot sacrifice the mental health of some for the recreational pleasure of 'most.'

Correspondingly, also in support of legalisation is Amanda Fielding, Countess of Wemyss and March and founder of the pro-drug Beckley Foundation. The foundation boldly assert in their book: 'Cannabis Policy: Moving beyond Stalemate,' that with regards to cannabis: 'Those harms at the population level are modest in comparison with alcohol or cocaine.' (Beckley Foundation, 2009, para. 2)

While there is no doubt that both alcohol and cocaine can create as much if not more misery than cannabis, its possible nature as a 'slightly lesser' evil is no cause for its celebration. Long gone are the days in which advocates could claim that the effects of cannabis were 'modest.' This well perpetuated myth of 'harmlessness' has now been comprehensively medically discredited.

There is an increasingly diverse research consensus that cannabis use is directly connected to serious mental health issues. Timms and Atakin (2014) revealed that Adolescents who use cannabis daily are

‘five times more likely to develop depression and anxiety later in life,’ (para. 36) while Hall & Degenhardt’s (2011) strong body of evidence indicates that: ‘cannabis precipitates schizophrenia in vulnerable people.’ (p. 511) Further, Hall & Degenhardt discovered that, for those with a family history of psychosis, regular cannabis use doubles the likelihood of development from one in ten, to one in five. (2011, p. 512) When we look at expectant mothers who smoke cannabis we see a direct correlation. The more they smoke, the greater the likelihood that their children will report feelings of depression and anxiety at the age of ten. (Goldschmidta, Richardson, Cornelius & Dayb, 2004, p. 526) Moreover, a huge American study, utilising the latest technology in brain-scanning equipment discovered that cannabis users had: ‘abnormally low blood flow in virtually every area of the brain.’ This means that users are at considerably higher risk of developing diseases such as Alzheimer’s. (Tatera, 2016, para. 1) Even Professor Nutt, a well-known proponent of legalisation, concedes that cannabis smokers are ‘2.6 times more likely to have a psychotic-like experience than non-smokers.’ (Nutt, 2009, para. 7)

In addition to the real danger cannabis poses to mental health, research suggests that the use of cannabis doubles the risk of infertility in men under the age of 30. (Connor, 2014, para. 1)

The mind is complicated beyond the possibility of human comprehension. A cautious and respectful approach to its potential damage is surely wise, as once it is lost it must be an exceedingly difficult thing to get back. There are few more disturbing things than seeing a friend or relative struggle with mental health issues – a daily battle not with the world but with themselves. Indeed, youngsters who use cannabis daily are seven times more likely to commit suicide. (Laccino, 2014, para. 1)

So, while Mr Branson might encourage you to smoke cannabis with your children, (Janssen, 2016, para 4) the evidence would suggest that doing so could be very damaging indeed.

2) USAGE RATES AND CANNABIS AS A GATEWAY DRUG

Those who back legalisation might argue that it is they who truly care about cannabis users and they who truly want to reduce the drug’s harmful impacts. This, they insist, will be made possible by the reduction in usage rates that a legalised market will deliver. Indeed, the entire foundation of the argument for legalisation rests on its ability to decrease the numbers of people using cannabis.

The facts and evidence stand comprehensibly against this assertion. Every single location in which there has been meaningful analysis of usage rates before and after legalisation or decriminalisation, including Portugal, Colorado, Southern Australia and Amsterdam, show an upsurge in the number of people using the drug. (Hughes and Steven, 2010, p. 1005), (Korf, 2002 pp. 854-856), (Single, Christie & Ali para. 25), (Keyes, 2015) Even within individual nations, the difference between usage rates in jurisdictions with varying legislative approaches is stark. 15.6% of citizens in the Netherlands have used cannabis compared to 36.7% of residents in Amsterdam. (Korf, 2002, p. 854-856) In fact, following the mainstream promotion of coffee-shops in Amsterdam, the rate of regular cannabis use among 18-to-20-year-olds more than doubled. (MacCoun and Reuter, 2010 as cited in Mineta, n.d para. 8)

Furthermore, legal cannabis would mean cheaper cannabis. Prohibition drives up the price of the drug by ‘at least’ 400%. (Mineta, n.d, para. 7) Studies have shown that when cigarettes are reduced in price by 10% their consumption shoots up by 7-8%. (Mineta, n.d, para. 7) While its proponents might have you believe ‘everyone’s getting high nowadays,’ it’s worth remembering that only 5% of

our population regularly smoke cannabis. (Dunt 2013 para. 1) This compared to 19% who smoke tobacco (Ash, 2016, para. 1) and 58% of adults who regularly drink alcohol. (Drinkaware, n.d, para. 10)

For some advocates of legalisation who, either genuinely believer or pretend to believe that legalisation will lead usage rates to decline, this evidence will, of course, be somewhat inconvenient. For others, it brings only adulation. In the US state of Colorado, the CEO of the Harvest Company dispensary, rejoiced that: 'People who would never have considered pot before are now popping their heads in.' (Keyes, 2015, para. 7) Likewise, when asked why he believed cannabis use had increased in the state since its legalisation, Henson, President of the Colorado Cannabis Chamber of Commerce, argued that more people felt at ease with the drug: 'They don't see it as something that's bad for them.' (Keyes, 2015, para. 6)

What's more, with regards to the gateway theory, the evidence is clear. Cannabis is a gateway drug. A 25-year longitude study revealed that in 86% of cases of those who had taken two or more illegal drugs, cannabis had been the substance they had used first. (Fergusson. D, Boden. J & Horwood. J 2011, p. 556) Moreover, those who used cannabis weekly were a staggering 59 times more likely to use other illegal drugs than those who did not use cannabis at all. (Fergusson, D. & Horwood J. 2000, pp. 505–520) In the United States, research revealed that only 7% of young people who had never used cannabis had indulged in other illegal drug use, compare this to 33% of the young people who reported using cannabis regularly and 84% of those who used it daily. (Kandel, 1984, pp. 200 – 209)

Advocates of legalisation, while often conceding the gateway theory, insist that this can easily be countered through legalisation that would disentangle legal cannabis from the illegal 'hard drug' black market.

However, cannabis users are not using other drugs because their dealers are forcing them down their throats or up their noses. Rather: 'the biochemical changes induced by marijuana in the brain result in a drug-seeking, drug-taking behaviour, which in many instances will lead the user to experiment with other pleasurable substances.' (Nahas, 1990, p. 52) Thus, cannabis users will likely seek to experiment with other illegal drugs regardless of the legal status of cannabis. Legalisation would result only in more cannabis users and thus a higher secondary demand for and entanglement within the remaining illegal drug market.

3) MONEY: A PRICE WORTH PAYING?

The Adam Smith Institute have promised the UK one billion pounds in additional annual tax revenue. All we must do is legalise the drug. However, we can see by examining the cost of alcohol abuse that any additional tax revenue would be dwarfed by the hugely increased medical and social costs brought about by increased usage. The taxes raised from alcohol cover only a tiny percentage of the societal cost brought about by alcohol misuse. Indeed, while there are no similar statistics available in the UK, a 2002 analysis of alcohol-related costs in America was estimated to be 184 billion dollars annually. (Mineta, n.d. para 10) But surely the billions of dollars raised in taxes more than covered

it? Not quite! Taxes on alcohol raised only 8.3 billion dollars in the same timeframe, just 4.5% of costs. (Mineta, n.d. para 10)

In addition, we can be sure that where there is profit to be made, there will be also be predatory capitalism. The aggressive commercialisation of cannabis has already begun, with 'big tobacco' companies investing considerable funding in their next project for the betterment of humanity. Similarly, Microsoft have unashamedly announced their partnership with 'Kind financial,' a business that 'logistically supports' cannabis growers. (Becker, 2016, para. 1) By definition, the purpose of dope companies within legal markets is to sell as much cannabis to as many people as possible and crucial to this pursuit is persuading new users to try their product. In the US there is growing concern these companies have already begun to target a young, impressionable audience with their advertisement. Likewise, disingenuous associations between cannabis and wellness and barefaced lies regarding the non-existent curative potential of the drug are becoming common-place. According to Vara, the aim is simple. Make as much money as possible by making: 'Pot seem as all-American as an ice-cold beer.' (Vara, 2016, para. 1)

4) SOCIAL MOBILITY and PUBLIC OPINION

Inevitably, it is working class young people who are least able to afford the damage that cannabis wreaks on their focus, self-belief and motivation, as well as on their education and career opportunities. It's well known that cannabis users have lower levels of dopamine in the striatum part of their brains, meaning lower levels of motivation and aspiration. (Bergland, 2013, para. 1) Even after a wide ranging and comprehensive allowance for confounding factors, a Christchurch study observing 1265 children found a strong link between educational underachievement and the use of cannabis. (Fergusson, Horwood & Beautrais, 2003, p. 1682) Those who had used the drug one hundred times or more before the age of sixteen were three times more likely than those who had never used cannabis to leave education without any qualifications. (Fergusson, Horwood & Beautrais, 2003, p. 1690) In addition, the numbing effect the drug has on the brain of a user and its ability to concentrate and remember things can continue for days after usage. This means that, for regular users, they may never be able to operate at the best of their ability and fulfil their potential. (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2016, p. 1) Overall then, after adjustment for confounding factors, Fergusson & Boden conclude that cannabis usage between the ages of 14 and 18 was 'Associated significantly' with 'lower levels of life and relationship satisfaction, lower income and higher levels of unemployment and welfare dependency.' (2011, p. 974)

Nevertheless, unlike many prominent proponents of legalisation, I'm a true believer in democracy. If working-class communities genuinely believe that the best way to combat cannabis is through legalisation, then who am I to argue. The reality is quite the contrary.

While many, like Lib Dem Norman Lamb falsely claim that Brits want cannabis to be legalised. (Doward, 2016, para. 1) A comprehensive poll showed that the British public oppose cannabis legalisation by forty-nine to thirty-two percent. (Jordan, 2015, para. 7) Moreover, various surveys show that those groups who are amongst the hardest hit by cannabis, namely the poor and ethnic minorities, often hold the toughest legal views. In 2010 30% of intermediate non-manual workers had used cannabis compared to 10% of unskilled manual workers. (Park, Curtice & Thompson, 2007, p. 127) Likewise, 'restrictive views' on cannabis were higher among those with lower educational

attainment. In 2001, just 25% of those with a degree held 'restrictive' views compared to 40% of those with A-levels as highest qualification and 61% with no qualifications. (Park, Curtice & Thompson, 2007, p. 126) Even an Ipsos Mori poll which found a slight majority of the overall public in favour of decriminalisation, found that this was supported by only 25% of Asians and 41% of blacks, compared to 55% of whites. (Ames & Worsley, 2013, p. 17)

Is this really surprising? After all, the dark world of drug-related crime, violence and addiction hit harder in the streets of Hull than they do in Hampstead. If we as a society truly care about those for whom cannabis creates the most suffering, maybe we should take the revolutionary approach of listening to what they think we should do about it.

5) SOLUTIONS AND PROPOSALS

Having demonstrated the toxic and damaging effects of cannabis on our society we must consider how we can best eradicate it.

In 1999, The Runciman report was published, calling for the decriminalisation of cannabis and concluding that ... 'The present law on cannabis produces more harm than it prevents.' (Runciman Report, 1999) This paper fully agrees that the present laws produce more harm than they prevent. However, this is not due to our nation's refusal to give in to the drug completely, but because we refuse to properly confront it.

Law enforcement

Insisting the only way to tackle drug criminality in working class communities is to capitulate to those terrorising them by legalising their product is defeatist madness.

The legislative framework and established penalties for the possession of cannabis are, in theory, suitable and rigorous. The maximum sentence for cannabis possession stands at five years' imprisonment. It is not therefore the theoretical legislative provision that is at fault, we require no new dramatic laws or hard-line legislation. To eradicate cannabis, we require only the practical application of existing legal provision by responsible judges and a police service, uniformly educated in and committed to this endeavour.

The Runciman report itself acknowledged that: 'almost no one is given an immediate custodial sentence solely for possession of cannabis.' (Runciman Report, 1999, p. 105) Real deterrence in the form of strict criminal penalties must be consistently enforced to stem the demand side of the trade. Police forces in the United Kingdom should operate a zero-tolerance approach to cannabis possession, with every case leading to arrest and a formal criminal record. In addition, the criminal justice system ought to implement a 'two strikes' policy. Upon a second arrest for cannabis possession the individual must always be given a prison sentence of meaningful length.

This can be enforced in several ways.

Rigorous, visible and aggressive policing can drive up the price of cannabis while mitigating the drug's negative secondary societal consequences. Community policing must, once again, be the focus of our law enforcement. Areas synonymous with youth cannabis usage must be visibly policed and dimly lit, urban, cannabis 'trouble spots' should be provided, where possible, with better lighting provision and mainstream public access.

The two-tier, confused policing of cannabis must also be immediately halted, while drug-snobbery and police profiling stamped out. Why are extensive bag searches and sniffer dogs common place at music festivals whose attendees are predominantly working class, such as Creamfields, while glitter-covered Home County revellers at Glastonbury can visibly consume drugs without consequence? The message that drugs are ok so long as secondary behaviour does not cause a nuisance must end - replaced by the message that taking drugs is wrong full-stop. Similarly, distinctions between supposed 'hard' and 'soft' drugs are largely unhelpful. The consumption of any illegal drug is morally wrong and so the use of all drugs must be discouraged with equal vigour.

Equally as important is the insistence that our police force consistently and fairly enforce the law and that certain, politically motivated members of the police hierarchy, who have sought to enact a backdoor decriminalisation process, stop. In a 2013 study, 103 officers out of 150 interviewed admitted they did not always arrest for cannabis possession. (Warburton May & Hough, 2005, p. 118) One officer stated: 'I never nick anyone for cannabis, and never will, unless it's a van load.' (Warburton May & Hough, 2005, p. 119)

Nowhere is this problem better illustrated as in County Durham, who's Police Chief Constable, Mick Barton, has taken it upon himself to give criminals in the county permission to grow skunk for their own consumption. (Evans, 2015, para. 1)

Sweden provides a useful case study into the potential effectiveness of this approach. Largely considered to have the toughest cannabis laws in Europe, few consider the drug 'soft.' Police have pursued a zero-tolerance approach with the vast majority of instances of possession leading to prosecution. This, coupled with the visible and proactive 'disturb and annoy' tactics of the national police force (Mapes, 2016, p. 1) have delivered a cannabis usage rate of just 3%. Lower than any other nation in Northern, Western or Southern Europe, with the exception of Lithuania, on 2%. (European monitoring centre for drugs and drug addiction, 2016)

Treatment and education

Further, we must counter the false claim that only legalisation can allow for effective and compassionate treatment for those who have become mentally dependent. Judgement-free, abstinence based assistance for those struggling, but willing to cease their habitual high should be well funded and available. This should be coupled with early intervention for those who have developed mental health problems. Likewise, we cannot be seen to be shying away from the debate on drugs, why would we? The facts and the evidence regarding the harmfulness of cannabis stand in our support. Education, countering fanciful claims that cannabis is 'twenty-two thousand' times less dangerous than alcohol should be comprehensive.

Of course, there could indeed be occasional situations in which cannabis might be a small force for good. Whilst it possesses no curative potential, it is reasonable to conduct a serious and evidence-based debate on the merits of tightly-regulated, prescriptive cannabinoids medication for the relief of specific symptoms in exceptional circumstances. In certain situations, morphine is of invaluable medical assistance. Using heroin recreationally is of great societal and personal damage. Nonetheless, this tiny element of cannabis usage has long been hijacked by those dogmatic in their pursuit of legalised recreational usage and until this ends, progress will be difficult.

Similarly, this paper is not an attack on the middle class in general, or even all those members of the middle class who smoke the drug. While sensible support networks and access to early intervention may help many navigate the pitfalls of cannabis, schizophrenia and depression respect not income nor family stability. It's our societal responsibility to safeguard all our people from a drug that may not, but may well, ruin their life.

CONCLUSION

However, most of those pushing for cannabis legalisation aren't doing so because they truly believe it is in the best interests of anyone's health or even finances. They're doing so because a world that gets high, is a world that appeals to them.

If cannabis was legalised it would be a monumental mistake impossible to reverse. We owe it to everyone to resist, with all our might, the 'inevitable' social normalisation and legislative legalisation of cannabis.

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David Sergeant read Politics at Durham University and is an Intern and Research Contributor at the Bow Group. He Co-Chaired the High Peak Constituency 'Vote Leave' group, sits on the Australian Monarchist League's New South Wales Committee and is Treasurer of Conservatives Abroad – Sydney.

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