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PHILIP COLLINS

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# Legalising cannabis is the right way forward

PHILIP COLLINS

Prohibition of the Class B drug has failed and it's time we copied Canada and Colorado by treating it like tobacco

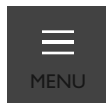


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The difficulty of changing one's mind in public means that governments persist with policies long after it has become clear they do not work. Altering course is mooted by brave souls but never properly considered. On we go, hurtling towards a dreadful mess.

In a time dominated by a hapless negotiation of a pointless enterprise, in which most other areas of policy are going by the wayside, this could be the introduction to almost any column. This week, though, like every week stretching back through



more than a dozen vendors openly, there are 250 million drug users

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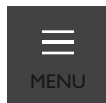
illegal drug at least once. The black market here for cannabis alone is worth more than £2.5 billion a year.

This week Canada became the second country, after Uruguay in 2013, to legalise the use of cannabis. People with convictions for possessing up to 30 grams will be pardoned and Canadians will henceforth be free to order marijuana products through websites run by provinces or private retailers.

Canada follows the US states of Washington, Nevada, California, Massachusetts and Colorado which have all legalised cannabis for recreational use. Prohibition has done nothing to control use but has instead created a criminal supply chain. It has put people through court proceedings who ought to be nowhere near the criminal justice system and it means that drugs come on to the black market without any regulation of their strength.

Just as prohibition in 1920s America encouraged the supply of strong bootleg whiskey, so the ban has brought stronger drugs on to the black market. One of the arguments voiced in favour of prohibition — that cannabis is so much more toxic than it was 20 years ago — is in fact a consequence of prohibition and legalisation would start to tackle it.

State regulation of cannabis would allow the control of cannabis strains with higher levels of tetrahydrocannabinol. The burden that falls on health services would be lightened. There would be no further criminalising of people — more than 1,300 in prison at the



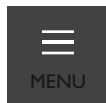
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courts would not be clogged up hearing about the petty crimes associated with possession. When Switzerland provided a legally regulated supply of heroin to people dependent on it, rates of burglary fell by half.

The savings to remedial services would be supplemented by an annual tax revenue on cannabis sales that could be as much as £1 billion. The money could be put into drug education and programmes to guide young people away from dangerous drugs. No advocate of legalisation thinks for a second that it is a panacea. Serious drug addiction needs not a war but a strategy that adds treatment, prevention and education to enforcement.

It is sometimes said that legalisation creates a free-for-all when regulation in fact disciplines supply. When sales are legal, identity can be checked and the rules on selling to minors can be enforced. At the moment, the young are horribly vulnerable to drug gangs and it would help to bring this activity within the fold of the law. To legalise cannabis is also a specific reform, which would not license general use. Drugs induce differing degrees of addiction and the regulation will have to vary accordingly. Cannabis ought to be bracketed closer to tobacco and alcohol than to heroin and crack cocaine. At the moment it is in the wrong category.

The fear that lies behind the arguments against legalisation is the anxiety that drug consumption will rise. In fact, in the Netherlands, where the possession and retail supply of cannabis is legal in practice, rates of cannabis use are almost the same as the



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not rise dramatically, as some feared. Drug use in Portugal remains below the European average a decade later.

However, these objections reveal the principal confusion in the argument about drug use. It is possible that legalisation of cannabis would lead to an increase in consumption. Yet that does not invalidate the policy. The task of policy is not to reduce consumption but to reduce harm. Reducing harm may, or may not, involve a reduction in consumption. Yet if cannabis is regulated, the stronger forms excluded, the criminal supply chain interrupted and the associated costs avoided, then harm will decline even if consumption increases.

As it was with the American prohibition of alcohol, at least some of the opposition to drugs is piety dressed up as a concern about harm. It would be better to accept that moderate drug use is inevitable and make it safer than to make irrelevant, moralistic arguments about all drugs being wrong.

The site of the argument at the moment is Colorado. A legal market in cannabis began trading in January 2014 and the early results are encouraging. There has been no obvious rise in cannabis use, in road fatalities or in crime (all of which were predicted), and there has been a dramatic drop in the number of people being criminalised. The illicit trade has shrunk and the state government has enjoyed a significant increase in tax revenue.



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for the first eight months of 2015. The state is on course to collect more than \$125 million by the end of the year. Most of this is now being spent on social programmes. Add the net good of these initiatives to the net reduction in harm associated with legalisation and Colorado is, so far at least, in the black.

Now attention will switch to Canada, which will become a drug policy laboratory for the world. If consumption of dangerous drugs does not increase markedly, if crime falls, if morally bankrupt suppliers cease to be enriched, then we ought to have the courage to copy its example. Not many public policies are a matter of life and death but drug policy is.

It seems intuitively sensible to prohibit things we suppose will do us harm. In fact, we know it doesn't make sense but we carry on anyway, rushing headlong towards the cliff edge in pursuit of something that experience has already taught us simply does not work. We await the politician with the courage to tell us the truth.

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