

The Market for **DRUGS**

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It's impossible to calculate the exact size of the illegal drug market as manufactures, distributors and dealers are notoriously poor at filling in their annual tax returns. However, plenty of organisations have come up with estimates and the figures are staggering

According to the United Nations, illegal drugs make up 8% of total world trade, which is more than the global market for textiles, clothing, iron and steel. With ever growing demand they also think that there are now over 200 million regular users of illegal drugs across the globe. In its last detailed study in Britain, the Home Office claims that somewhere in the region of £6.6 billion is spent each year in the UK on narcotics.

Many large companies would be proud of this sort of turnover and delighted to have such a loyal customer base.

In a major study by the UK Drug Policy Commission they found that British expenditure on illicit drugs is distributed across the following areas: Crack 28%; Heroin 23%, Cannabis 20%; Cocaine 18%; Amphetamines 6% and Ecstasy 5%. The Home Office estimates that there

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Cocaine fields near Cuzco, Peru

are approximately 300 major importers into the UK, 3,000 wholesalers and 70,000 end user dealers. They've also looked at the reasons why people start selling drugs in the first place. There is a common misconception that many users sell drugs to fuel their habit but in reality this represents a small proportion of the numbers of individuals who enter this dangerous but often lucrative market. The Home Office found that over two thirds of people sell drugs purely for financial reasons with many being introduced into the business by family and friends.

Our drugs policy in the UK clearly doesn't work and our law enforcement strategies do little to stop the expansion of the market. So is it now time to seriously consider the decriminalisation of some drugs? Unfortunately, this very question causes such an emotive response that it's hard to have a serious public debate

on the issue. Many people presume that it means endorsing drugs and giving people the green light to take whatever they want. Part of the problem is a lack of understanding between the terms legalise and decriminalise so let's be clear what we're talking about. Decriminalisation would mean that people couldn't be prosecuted for the possession of a certain substance. Legalisation means that people are free to take and trade drugs in anyway they please. No one who seriously argues for the decriminalisation of illegal drugs denies the harm that they do. The aim would be to take the market away from criminal organisations and educate people in the danger of drug use.

Bob Ainsworth is a labour MP and former defence secretary who has recently called for a new debate on Britain's drug problem. Under the last Labour government he served in the Home Office

and the Ministry of Defence where he was involved in official drugs policy. His experience working in this field changed his opinion of the best way to tackle the drugs problem in the UK.

"My views changed while I was in the Home Office. I came to the job with the traditional view that if we were tougher we could dismantle some of these criminal gangs. During my time there I realised that this could never work and that the war on drugs cannot be won. Indeed, you realise that we are not even trying to stop the flow of drugs. A conversation with a senior police officer will confirm that we are merely disrupting the criminal supply, in effect trying to prevent the growth of a Mafia and keep the supply fragmented," said Mr Ainsworth.

Mr Ainsworth is the most senior MP so far to call for the decriminalisation of

drugs. I asked him why he has waited until now to stick his head above the parapet on this issue rather than address it publicly while he was still in the Home Office. "My own party disagrees with what I am saying, so my choice, had I wanted to go further, within the limitations of collective responsibility, would have been to resign."

This point is important as it's the key issue that stops us having a proper debate at government level about how to tackle narcotics. Any serving minister who looks soft on drugs knows that the press will have a field day and that they will probably lose their job. Of course being in opposition allows more flexibility and it should be noted that David Cameron had different views on this issue back in 2002 during a spell on the House of Commons' home affairs select committee that called for a reclassification of some drugs.

"He went along not only with all the changes that we made, but with the Committee's report, which asked the Government to go further in two particular areas: to reclassify ecstasy from class A to class B, which the Government would not do; and, more important, to have a full debate on the alternatives to prohibition. He supported and advocated that, and he was right to do so. We did not go along with that, nor have the current Government. They have condemned it and ruled it out in the new drugs strategy. When the right hon. Gentleman became leader of the Conservative party, he felt, for reasons best known to himself, that he needed to recant and said that he had been wrong to support that policy. That shines a light on exactly what the problem is." Said Mr Ainsworth.

People think that the Netherlands has the most relaxed drug laws in Europe

but this isn't the case. Holland has never legalised cannabis, although small amounts for personal use have been decriminalised. The real success story for decriminalising drugs is Portugal. In 2001 it became the first European country to decriminalise the possession of drugs including marijuana, cocaine and heroin. At the time critics of the new policy hailed it as a disaster in the making claiming it would open the country to "drug tourists" and make Portugal's narcotic problems far worse. There is now plenty of data available that shows exactly what has happened in this great social experiment. Five years after the law was changed, drug use amongst teenagers in Portugal had actually dropped. The rate of new HIV infections caused by the sharing of dirty needles was also down and the number of people seeking treatment for drug addiction had doubled. The death toll caused by



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heroin and other drugs was cut in half and Portugal now has the lowest rate of lifetime marijuana use in people aged over 15 in the whole European Union.

Glenn Greenwald of the Cato institute who has carried out some major research into Portugal and its drug policy is convinced of their success. “Judging by every metric, decriminalization in Portugal has been a resounding success. It has enabled the Portuguese government to manage and control the drug problem far better than virtually every other Western country.” He said.

So what are the arguments for keeping things as they are apart from a lack of political will? The most powerful response is that by decriminalising drugs we would remove the social stigma attached to them and send out a message of tolerance for drug use, especially to young people, which in turn would lead to an increase in the abuse of substances. But where is the


evidence that supports this theory? In the interest of a fair and balanced article I contacted a variety of organisations that work in the field of drugs addiction and not one supported this view. So I spoke to the chief executive of the UK Drug Policy Commission (UKDPC). They are an independent body set up to give objective analysis of Britain’s drug policy and to ensure that this is used by the UK government.

“On the evidence it would appear that decriminalisation for simple personal possession cases would bring all the benefits and savings to the criminal justice system with little prospect of increased usage.” Said Roger Howard, chief executive UKDPC.

There’s only one place left to head to find out why we shouldn’t decriminalise drugs so it’s back to the Home Office to talk to James Brokenshire. He’s the minister for crime prevention and under his remit the current government

is determined to continue our existing drug policies.

“Drugs are harmful and ruin lives - decriminalisation is not the answer. It is a simplistic solution that fails to recognise the complexity of the problem and ignores the serious harm drug taking poses to the individual. Decriminalisation fails to address the reasons people misuse drugs in the first place or the misery, cost and lost opportunities that dependence causes individuals, their families and the wider community.” Said Mr Brokenshire

Back in December Mr Brokenshire announced a new strategy to crack down harder on those involved in the drugs trade whilst revolutionising treatment for people with dependence problems. Let’s hope that this makes some positive headway in dealing with all of the problems caused by narcotics in the UK. 

By Ian Wood