

Legalising drugs: debates and dilemmas

Philip Bean (2010)
Policy Press, Bristol University
Book review by Sally Ramage

This little book is very topical, because of the classification of Mepodrone and Khat and also because of the new Crime and Security Act 2010 and its impact on young offenders. Some might argue that the government has been through a knee-jerk reaction in acting quickly without any deep study of the issues and this book assists in the debate about the special problem of juveniles and a discussion about legal moralism. Philip Bean examines six policy options: prohibition; harm reduction; medicalisation; decriminalisation; legal moralism and economic liberalism and it is important to remember that his debates are reserved only for drugs controlled under the 1971 Misuse of Drugs Act. Looking to other countries and their handling of the drug problems, Bean quotes the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse Working Group's five principles of harm reduction:

- "(1) pragmatism- being realistic and recognising that drug taking carries risk and accepting that abstinence is not necessarily attainable or desirable;*
- (2) humanistic values- which means respect for the worth and dignity of all persons including drug users;*
- (3) reducing the negative consequences of drug use- which may not necessarily be promoted by focusing on decreasing or eliminating use;*
- (4) examining the costs and benefits of drug use- in order to arrive at that balance between promoting individual and common good (supervised injection facilities are an example of such a balance);*
- (5) focusing on and giving priority to the goals listed above -using democratic values of collaboration and participation with those who are marginalised in society".*

With the Western world suffering from an extensive drug abuse problem, it is difficult to know where to start and this may excuse the government's rushed laws to classify the cultural smoking of 'khat' by a minute minority of ethnic men in this country or the prison service leaving drug addict offenders without methadone to go 'cold turkey'-a most dangerous practice. The UK has the largest number of drug abusers in Europe forty years after Lord Wildelsham's speech in the House of Lords (Hansard 1971) said:

'Drugs are responsible for the undermining of family and community life...'

In Britain, no progress has been seen in the fight against illegal drug use. Drugs are still seen to undermine family life. Perhaps we should look at the underlying reason why so many people, especially poor, working class people, still want to blank out their days and nights as they see no hope of getting out of their economic or cultural situation. The drugs they take, help to dull the emptiness and lack of prospects they perceive. Perhaps society should look at other indirect reasons for substantial drug taking- such as the instantaneous transmission of images of wealth and grandeur, sexual prowess, and perfectionism that floods into society's homes and ears via television and mobile equipment- it is this that may cause overly-high expectation, burglaries, fraud, despair and drug taking.

Britain has a growing prostitution sector, one driver of which is the drug addiction of many young prostitutes, as was sadly highlighted when five young prostitutes were murdered in Ipswich in 2006. *Drug habit is the driver of such prostitution and this is a vivid example of a need to legalise drugs, with solutions such as in Switzerland, where Class A drug heroin, rather than Methodone, is available on prescription from a doctor, enabling the addict to obtain drugs legally at a stroke, rather than through a pimp or a dealer.* This medical support manages and then reduces that addiction thereafter. More than 1,000 heroin addicts are currently on the Swiss Heroin Assisted Treatment Programme- around 75 % of the country's addicted population- and they can access heroin at 22 injection centres across the country. One result of this policy has been a dramatic drop in crime, with 70 % of those who enter the scheme in Switzerland admitting that they had been involved in criminal activity, this figure decreasing to 10 % after just 18 months of receiving their drugs in this way. However, rather than heeding the 2007 RSA's report on illegal drugs which called for the abolition of the existing ABC classification system, the authorities have added more substances to the ABC system.

There is much food for thought in this small book, easily readably on the train, bus, plane. We must address this problem. One neglected area of drug misuse is the huge organised crime it creates which is facilitated by money laundering. The impact of drug misuse on the economy is well illustrated in a recent United States case- reported on 22 April 2010-involving more than \$40 million worth of gold, silver and jewellery, forfeited in an international money laundering investigation, the \$40 million being the proceeds from illegal narcotics proceeds from the United States. The Attorney General of the US said:

"This forfeiture of more than \$40 million in jewellery should remind criminals around the globe that they will be found, prosecuted and stripped of assets that are not theirs to keep. With increased international cooperation, we are steadfastly working to forfeit launderers' dirty assets and proving".

According to evidence presented in the case, Hebroni and her companies were involved in a money laundering conspiracy that included coordinating and receiving drug proceeds from the United States through cash pick-ups, wire transfers, cashiers checks and third party bank checks. Specifically, Hebroni and Mizrahi operated and built Speed Joyeros S.A. and Argento Vivo S.A., which together did more than \$100 million in business annually. This business consisted of the money-laundering of millions of dollars of Columbian drug money. According to court documents, Speed Joyeros S.A. and Argento Vivo S.A. were heavily involved in the Black Market Peso Exchange. Numerous drug-related assets were identified in Panama and later seized by Panamanian authorities in accordance with a seizure order issued in the Eastern District of New York as part of these cases. The assets transferred to the United States included approximately 468 boxes of gold and silver jewellery, as well as gemstones and watches, weighing ten tons, seized from Speed Joyeros S.A. and Argento Vivo S.A. This case is a prime example of trans-border trafficking of illicit drugs.

The author of *Legalising Drugs* urges the consideration of the five strategies as set out by the Canadians and concludes that there is insufficient justification for change to the drugs policy of the UK since there has been no detailed considerations of likely failings of policies already taken up. Another case of stumbling from one policy change to the next! We must end the cycle of drug abuse and drug violence in our society.