

Ross Meurant: The Case for Decriminalization of All Dope.

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During my first four years as a National MP I initiated four policy papers; three of which were ultimately embraced as party policy. But the fourth, to legalise drugs, failed miserably.

By the time I articulated my view in my second book; *Beat to the Beehive*, I had wimped out under internal National party pressure and merely articulated a case to study in depth, the consequences of legalising cannabis and to consider changes in that direction.

Privately I argued all dope should be decriminalized and now, 10 years later, I believe the evidence I gathered is as valid as ever. My case in 1990 was based on research done during my last years in the police. As an inspector and university student I had high level access to police data and an academic interest in drug crime.

The research suggested that perhaps 50 per cent of all crime in New Zealand was drug related.

The empirical data – which I collected in the Auckland police cells and extrapolated as a hypothesis across the country – covered arrests for importing; supply; possession for supply; theft, burglaries and robberies for drugs or money to buy drugs and possession for self-use.

It was obvious that a high percentage of serious crime – such as bank robberies, kidnappings and serious assaults – had a drug related theme.

Gangs needed ready cash to make down payments on large imported cashes; addicts needed cash to feed their habits. Then there was gang warfare over territorial distribution rights and retribution over payments not made.

It occurred to me that the police workload might be reduced substantially if the drugs people fought over, killed for, and died protecting, were dispensed through government licensed outlets – just like alcohol.

It would be possible to establish the names of all who entered government licensed stores to make legal purchase of substances we presently deem illegal.

This record of “users”; those who used hard drugs such as heroin, could be placed on a register for treatment and counselling from health professionals.

Drug addiction, like alcoholism, is a sickness. It should not be treated as a crime -although penalties for abuse in public places would be part of armoury to protect citizens from those who took unlawful drugs but caused a nuisance. This is what happens new with alcohol.

The question of young being vulnerable is no more potent a concern with drugs than alcohol. Alcohol has an impact on perhaps 75 percent of crime, much road carnage and nor is it good for your health.

Yet we as a society tolerate continued advertising of alcohol as a desirable cultural characteristic – and why? I suggest it is the power of the brewery lobby and the recognition that prohibition simply won't work (Al Capone's rise to infamy being a classic consequence of the Prohibition era in America).

The best way to control alcohol use by young people is not to make it unobtainable but to impose draconian penalties where misuse, particularly where the effects of misuse are manifest in a public place impacts adversely on others – for example, in the home.

Zero tolerance with drink drive for people under 28 is my start point. Overnight in police cell for street drunkenness is another bottom line.

The same rationale I suggest could be applied to drug use.

What simply does not work is the system of severe penalties for producing, transshipping and selling substances deemed illegal. Whether it be the death penalty, life imprisonment or examples of many past and present profile cases where 'mules' let alone people higher up the supply chain are imprisoned in foreign jails with terrifying reputations.

All these and other attempts to prohibit possession and use of drugs through a punitive approach to the supply line have failed.

Others suggested that the international community (a euphemism for "someone else not me") revisit the question of legalisation.

It is my contention that the pain to society of trying to protect a minority from themselves is disproportionate to the benefits of society.

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