

Comment

This month Jacqui Smith announced that in a Labour policy u-turn she is going to reclassify cannabis from a class C drug back up to a class B, meaning tougher measures against users and suppliers.

The home secretary said she wanted to reverse Tony Blair's 2004 downgrading of the drug because of 'uncertainty' over its impact on mental health, amidst fears that Blair's original reclassification has led to a social acceptance of the drug which has fuelled higher usage numbers amongst young people, putting more at risk from mental health problems.

On the surface then this appears to be a sensible political decision and Smith's suggestions that she is not willing to 'risk the health of young people,' are commendable.

However, the recent decision has seen the government completely ignore the findings and recommendations of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD), commissioned by Gordon Brown to look into the links between cannabis use and mental illness. This group of experts decided by 20 votes to three to recommend that cannabis remain a class C drug. Its nine-month review concluded that while more potent, homegrown strains of herbal cannabis, such as skunk, now dominate the British market, the evidence of a substantial link with mental illness remains weak.

Supporting this statement from ACMD a recent report on mental health links with cannabis stated that 'to prevent one case of schizophrenia in men aged 20 to 24 about 5,000 men would have to be prevented from ever smoking cannabis.' Whilst there is no denying that the use of cannabis, and other mind-altering drugs, can in some cases exacerbate or cause mental problems, the findings and research of experts constantly find that statistically the chances are low - even as low as one in 5,000.

It could be easily suggested that this move by a Labour government in electoral despair following their drubbing at the recent local elections is a reactionary populist change in policy and an attempt to bring back voters.

Fuelled by swathes of media-misinformation in certain areas of the press there is a widespread condemnation of the drug. Much of the public believe that use of the drug has increased since 2004 and is responsible for many problems in society including mental health issues, violence, crime and a general decrease in societal standards.

In terms of press scaremongering cannabis is an easy target. Unlike alcohol, to much of society it is a largely unknown quantity, the drug of shadowy figures in the darkness - so it is easy to believe the press speculation regarding it.

In reality things are a little different: as explained before on the question 'does cannabis cause mental illness' the answer is 'we don't really know, but the evidence suggests it does in a minority of cases' - not the colossal problem the government, and the press, want us to be afraid of.

Should cannabis be proven to be linked to all these things then I for one would support new legislation but the fact of the matter is that statistical evidence either doesn't support the press claims or there is very little or no data to support it at all.

A big question regarding the reclassification is will it deter people from using the drug and will it solve any of the supposed



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problems caused by its use?

In practice Smith confirmed that the police approach to those under 18 found in possession of small amounts would remain unchanged and that the police will continue to have the discretion to issue warnings to most adults found with small amounts of dope.

Sir Michael Rawlins, ACMD chairman, has also claimed that the move will make 'no difference' to the level of cannabis use. He may have a point considering most users won't care about it becoming a little more illegal especially when much of the policing of such crimes will go unchanged.

Interestingly enough figures suggest that since the reclassification of cannabis in 2004 the drug has seen a 28% decrease in its usage by 16-24 year olds.

In decreasing the notoriety of the drug it seems that most young people appear to have largely lost interest in it. Following this evidence it could be claimed that Smith's move could actually be the cause of an increase in cannabis use amongst young people as she increases the drugs notoriety and 'cool' factor, making it more appealing in certain quarters. This point alone sug-

gests that Smith's decision may have little to do with combating the problems of cannabis use.

Taking a long-hard look at the facts and evidence it becomes clear that Labour's recent reclassification of cannabis is not built on knowledge, research and expert findings but on little more than speculation, hear-say and press-fuelled public fear. As someone who isn't a cannabis user, this legislation affects me very little, but I still believe that our government should act on fact not fiction - it is not their job to give into public pressure if the views of the public are wrong.

In this case they claim they are acting in the public interest but yet cannot prove this claim, making it look like they are doing little more than acting in the best interest of winning more votes.

As Labour MP Chris Mullin, who disagrees with the reclassification, said: "The government should follow the advice of the experts rather than that of the tabloids."

Comment by Chris Marks

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