

Release

Drugs, The Law & Human Rights

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Dear Prime Minister

We, the signatories of this letter, call on the Coalition Government to undertake a swift and transparent review of the effectiveness of current drug policies. Should such a review of the evidence demonstrate the failure of the current position we would call for the decriminalisation of drug possession.

This week marks the 40th anniversary of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. In the past forty years use of illicit drugs in the UK has grown rapidly. It is clear that the present system of applying the criminal law to the personal use and possession of drugs has failed in its aim. Conversely, the harms caused by pursuing this approach to drug use have been significant.

In the last year alone nearly 80,000 people in the UK were found guilty or cautioned for possession of an illegal drug - most were young, black or poor. This policy is costly for taxpayers and damaging for communities. Criminalising people who use drugs leads to greater social exclusion and stigmatisation making it much more difficult for them to gain employment and to play a productive role in society. It creates a society full of wasted resources.

In 2010 the Vienna Declaration was launched at the International AIDS conference, the Declaration called for a more evidence based health focused approach to drug policy and for the decriminalisation of drug possession. To date the Declaration has been signed by over 20,000 people worldwide including former presidents of several South American countries, Nobel Prize winners in the fields of science and literature, members of the judiciary and senior law enforcement officials. In the UK there have been repeated calls for a review of the current system from members of the Bar Council, the medical profession and members of both Houses of Parliament, notably the former Minister responsible for drugs.

In 2001 Portugal decriminalised the possession of all drugs and, despite sensationalist predictions to the contrary, this has led to a decrease in the number of young people using illicit drugs, an overall reduction in the number of people using drugs problematically, fewer drug related deaths, and an increase in people accessing treatment voluntarily, things we would all like to see happen in the UK. Whilst there are other factors to take into account, it is clear from the Portuguese experience, and from other jurisdictions, that the decriminalisation of drug possession and use does not lead to an increase in drug use or related harms.

The failure of the current UK system of criminalisation is clear - alternatives must be considered. It is time for the UK to review its policy, to reduce its reliance on an overburdened criminal justice system, and to adopt an evidence based and health focused approach to drug use.

Yours sincerely

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DRUGS - IT'S TIME FOR BETTER LAWS

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