

F20: Protecting Individuals and Communities from Drug Harms

Proposed by: Glasgow South, Liberal Youth and 23 conference representatives

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Conference notes:

- I. That drugs are powerful substances which can have serious consequences for the individual user and society in general; and that it is therefore right and proper that the state should intervene to regulate and control the use of such substances as it does the consumption of legal drugs such as alcohol and tobacco and both prescription and over-the-counter medicines.
- II. That the misuse of drugs can blight the lives of individuals and families and the purchase of illegal drugs can help to fuel organised crime.
- III. The need for evidence-based policy making on drugs with a clear focus on prevention and harm-reduction.
- IV. That there is increasing evidence that the UK's drugs policy is not only ineffective and not cost-effective but actually harmful, impacting particularly severely on the poor and marginalised.

Conference further notes:

- i) The positive evidence from new approaches elsewhere, including Portuguese reforms that have been successful in reducing problematic drug use through decriminalising possession for personal use of all drugs and investing in treatment programmes.
 - ii) That those countries and states that have decriminalised possession of some or all drugs have not seen increased use of those drugs relative to their neighbours.
 - iii) That heroin maintenance clinics in Switzerland and the Netherlands have delivered great health benefits for addicts while delivering considerable reductions in drug-related crime and prevalence of heroin use.
 - iv) The contribution of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs to the 2010 Drug Strategy consultation which states that "people found to be in possession of drugs (any) for personal use (and involved in no other criminal offences) should not be processed through the criminal justice system but instead be diverted into drug education/awareness courses or possibly other, more creative civil punishment".
 - v) The report of the Global Commission on Drug Policy whose members include former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, former heads of state of Colombia, Mexico, Brazil and Switzerland, the current Prime Minister of Greece, a former US Secretary of State and many other eminent world figures, which encouraged governments to consider the legal regulation of drugs in order to, "undermine the power of organised crime and safeguard the health and security of their citizens".
 - vi) That the United Kingdom remains bound by various international conventions and that any re-negotiation or new agreements will require international co-ordination.
- Conference believes that:

- A. Individuals, especially young people, can be damaged both by the imposition of criminal records and by a drug habit, and that the priority for those addicted to all substances must be healthcare, education and rehabilitation, not punishment.
- B. Governments should reject policies if they are demonstrated to be ineffective in achieving their stated goals and should seek to learn from policies which have been successful.
- C. At a time when Home Office and Ministry of Justice spending is facing considerable contraction, there is a powerful case for examining whether an evidence-based policy would produce savings, allowing the quality of service provided by these departments to be maintained or to improve.
- D. One of the key barriers to developing better drugs policy has been the previous Labour Government's persistent refusal to take on board scientific advice, and the absence of an overall evaluative framework of the UK's drugs strategy.
- E. The Department of Health and devolved equivalents should take on a greater responsibility for dealing with drugs.
- F. Issues such as housing, family and youth support, mental health and tackling unemployment and high inequality should not be overlooked as means of both averting problematic drug use and supporting recovery.

Conference calls for:

1. The Government to immediately establish an independent panel tasked with carrying out an Impact Assessment of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, to properly evaluate, economically and scientifically, the present legal framework for dealing with drugs in the United Kingdom.
2. The panel also to consider reform of the law, based on the Portuguese model, such that:
 - a) Possession of any controlled drug for personal use would not be a criminal offence.
 - b) Possession would be prohibited but should cause police officers to issue citations for individuals to appear before panels tasked with determining appropriate education, health or social interventions.
3. The panel also to consider as an alternative, potential frameworks for a strictly controlled and regulated cannabis market and the potential impacts of such regulation on organised crime, and the health and safety of the public, especially children.
4. The reinvestment of any resources released into effective education, treatment and rehabilitation programmes.
5. The widespread provision of the highest quality evidence-based medical, psychological and social services for those affected by drugs problems; these services should include widespread availability of heroin maintenance clinics for the most problematic and vulnerable heroin users.
6. The Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs to retain a majority of independent scientific and social scientific experts in its membership and no changes to drug laws be made without receiving its advice as per the 1971 Misuse of Drugs Act.