

Cannabis too dangerous to be a class C drug

The Government is sending out the message that taking cannabis is OK. It is proposing to reclassify cannabis from a class B to a class C drug. Under its plans most cannabis users caught by the police will not be arrested. They will simply be verbally ticked-off and have the drug confiscated. This is the most liberal approach taken by any Government since cannabis use became common in the 1960s.

Although advocates of the move say 'cannabis is not being legalised', the effect will be virtually the same. Abstruse arguments about whether it is technically decriminalised will be lost



on young people. Following publicity about the Government's plans, the Department for Education and Skills was forced to issue guidance earlier this year reminding pupils that cannabis possession is still illegal.¹

Cannabis is far too dangerous to be shunted into class C – to be put on the same level as sleeping pills (e.g. Diazepam or Temazepam).

Cannabis is a very harmful mind-altering drug. It causes schizophrenia, cancer and is responsible for a rising proportion of road deaths.²

An explosion in cannabis use would be a massive strain on the NHS.

The reclassification of cannabis is only the beginning for the pro-legalisation lobby. It is a foot in the door. They have already persuaded the Commons Home Affairs Select Committee to call for the downgrading of ecstasy.³

The Government's policy undermines parents who want to keep their children off drugs. Its inevitable result will be more cannabis use – by young people in particular. Overall, reclassification will lead to open drug taking and dealing – as we have seen in Lambeth.

On 9th September 2003, two days before the Government laid the reclassification order, newspapers reported the suicide of Charles King, a student aged 23.⁴ The inquest into his death was told he killed himself after developing a mental illness induced by cannabis use. He left a note saying "cannabis has ruined my life".

Government agency gives children tips on using cannabis

A shocking leaflet for children that gives tips on smoking cannabis has been produced by a Government agency. The leaflet is made to look like a pack of the Rizla cigarette papers commonly used in cannabis 'joints'. It dramatically downplays the dangers of cannabis. It has been produced by Connexions – an advice service set up by the Department for Education and Skills.⁵

Cannabis was written by a group called 'Clued-Up'. It gives steps for how to smoke cannabis with tobacco and adds: "It can also be smoked on its own in pipes or bongs or on heated knives (Spats)." When listing its effects, the leaflet states "...Cannabis can make you feel relaxed, chilled out and giggly. You may feel more sociable and chatty." Other effects listed are "you may get an attack of 'the munchies'" and "some people who try cannabis experience



The leaflet is designed to look like a pack of Rizla cigarette papers.

nothing at all!" The only adverse effects listed are feeling dizzy, sick and faint as well as feeling paranoid.

The leaflet would clearly have the effect of encouraging children to smoke cannabis. It is designed to appeal to young secondary school pupils and has

already been sent to as many as 3,500 secondary schools.⁶ But following the public outcry the leaflet has recently been banned in England by the Department for Education and Skills.⁷

Fears of the British Lung Foundation

The British Lung Foundation published an alarming report in November 2002 on the health risks from smoking cannabis. The report 'A Smoking Gun?' called for a public health campaign to raise awareness of the many risks of cannabis, such as pulmonary infections, respiratory cancers and weakening of the immune system.

Rank and file police oppose downgrade

The Police Federation of England and Wales, the representative body of rank and file police officers, is fiercely opposed to reclassifying cannabis. The Federation believes cannabis is the "number one illicit gateway drug...The resulting message to young people has been nebulous and confusing, doing little to deglamorise the drug."¹²

Cannabis: the Government's proposals to soften the law

On 11th September the Government laid the statutory instrument which will reclassify cannabis from a class B to a class C drug - *The Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 (Modification) (No. 2) Order 2003*. This must be voted on by both Houses of Parliament before it can become law.

On the same day, the Association of Chief Police Officers published its guidance stating the policing policy towards cannabis following reclassification. The previous suggestion of a 'three strikes and you're out' rule has been abandoned. There will be a presumption against arrest for possession of cannabis.⁸

The Government believes that in most cases users will be simply warned and have the drug confiscated.⁹ Users will only be arrested in cases "where public order is at risk or children are vulnerable". Under 18s "will receive a formal reprimand or warning at a police station".¹⁰ The ACPO guidance also advises the arrest of people found repeatedly breaking the law. However, the verbal warnings which are the mainstay of the new policy will only be recorded by individual police forces. It is difficult to see, therefore,

how police forces will be able to identify repeat offenders from other areas.

The Criminal Justice Bill 2003 will make the possession of all class C drugs an arrestable offence and dealing in class C drugs subject to a 14-year maximum prison sentence. These measures apply to *class B* drugs at the moment. The Government is simply extending them to class C drugs so that the sanctions will continue to apply to cannabis after reclassification. It is particularly important that the maximum sentence for supplying cannabis remains at 14 years. This allows customs officials to continue to monitor cannabis smugglers using electronic detection methods.

The maximum sentence for possessing a class C drug is two years. In theory this would apply to cannabis after it was reclassified. However, as few cannabis users are ever likely to be arrested, it is hard to imagine any user being prosecuted, let alone being imprisoned on conviction.

Reclassification applies to the whole of the UK. In Scotland Jack McConnell, the First Minister, has said that cannabis possession will continue to be dealt with as before.¹¹ This may well be possible given that there are different police powers in Scotland. However, at present there is no power of arrest for possession of a class C drug in Northern Ireland. The Government intends that the Criminal Justice Bill, once passed, will enable it to introduce a power of arrest for the province which corresponds to that in England and Wales. It remains to be seen whether this will precede reclassification.

There will be a presumption against arrest for possession of cannabis

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Mental Illness:

Cannabis causes psychosis
van Os, J et al, American Journal of
Epidemiology, 2002

This Dutch study found that those taking large amounts of cannabis were **seven times** more likely to develop a psychotic illness.¹³

The study was carried out on 4,045 members of the general population who were free of mental illness. The sample was followed-up over three years.¹⁴

Professor Robin Murray, Professor of Psychiatry at the Institute of Psychiatry, has publicly highlighted this study. In July 2003 he warned the annual general meeting of the Royal College of Psychiatrists "This research must not be ignored".¹⁵

Psychosis is a symptom of many mental illnesses – including schizophrenia. Two studies in the *British Medical Journal* in 2002 proved a causal link between cannabis and schizophrenia.¹⁶

Addiction:

Teenage cannabis users are five times more likely to become addicts when adults

Coffey, C et al, *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 2003

This study found that using cannabis weekly as an adolescent increased the odds of developing addiction **fivefold**.¹⁷

The study, from Australia, followed teenagers aged 14/15 up to the age of 20/21. There were seven follow-up interviews in that time.

Overall the study found that **one third** of adolescent users reporting at least weekly use became addicted as adults.¹⁸

Deaths:

Widespread cannabis use could cause 30,000 deaths a year

Henry, J A et al, *British Medical Journal*, 2003

Professor John Henry used the annual number of deaths from smoking tobacco to suggest how many deaths cannabis may cause each year.¹⁹

Tobacco is responsible for over 120,000 deaths each year among 13 million smokers.

Therefore "the corresponding figure for deaths among 3.2 million cannabis smokers would be 30,000, assuming equality of effect. Even if the number of deaths attributable to cannabis turned out to be a fraction of that figure, smoking cannabis would still be a major public health hazard."

Cannabis users are 59 times more likely to take other illegal drugs

The gateway theory states that taking one drug opens the gate to the use of other drugs.²⁰ There is evidence that because cannabis and harder drugs, such as heroin and cocaine, have similar effects on the brain, cannabis may act as a gateway to those harder drugs.²¹ A study from New Zealand in 2000 found that heavy cannabis users were **59 times** more likely than non-users to take other illicit drugs such as ecstasy and LSD.²²

Lambeth's 'softly, softly' approach was a disaster

The controversial cannabis pilot scheme run by Lambeth police led to open drug dealing on the streets of Brixton. It is hard to deny that it caused an alarming increase in drug use, even among children.

Under the scheme, which reclassification will mirror, police stopped arresting for possession of small quantities of cannabis, giving warnings and confiscating instead. The scheme resulted in a huge escalation of hard drug use and dealing. In a devastating admission of this, Chief Superintendent Brian Moore, then Acting Borough Commander for Lambeth stated: "The centre of Brixton is a 24-hour crack supermarket."²³ The scheme also led to an increase in drug use among children. Deputy Assistant Commissioner at the time, Michael Fuller, stated children felt police were sending mixed messages. He noted reports of children arriving at school stoned on cannabis and parents concerned that relaxing the law would inevitably result in more young people experimenting with cannabis.²⁴ Labour MP Kate Hoey, whose constituency was affected by the scheme, fiercely criticised it stating "there are more drug dealers on the streets than ever, many young children are going to school in the morning zonked out on a very hard kind of cannabis."²⁵



'there are more drug dealers on the streets than ever'

Labour's Kate Hoey MP

UN criticises Government's plan to downgrade cannabis to class C

The United Nations drugs watchdog has voiced concerns about the UK Government's proposal to soften the law on cannabis.

The International Narcotics Control Board says it is worried about the "worldwide repercussions" of such a move. The control board said the proposal "had sent the wrong message".²⁶

Simple and powerful rebuttals of common arguments

Many false arguments are being circulated to justify reclassification. Here are some of those arguments, each with a simple rebuttal.

X **Reclassification puts out a more effective message about the harm caused by cannabis.**

✓ The current law is clear. Cocaine is a class A drug, cannabis is a class B drug. Cannabis is far too dangerous to be shunted into class C – to be put on the same level as sleeping pills.

X **Cannabis is not a very harmful drug.**

✓ Cannabis is a very harmful mind-altering drug. It is responsible for a rising proportion of road deaths, it causes schizophrenia and cancer.

X **We need to focus on class A drugs to save police time.**

✓ The police concentrate on class A drugs already. As the 'gateway' evidence shows, if more people take cannabis, more people will go on to take harder drugs. This approach is totally self-defeating.

X **The Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs recommended reclassification.**

✓ The ACMD report also warned "Since cannabis use has only become commonplace in the past 30 years there may be worse news to come."²⁸

X **Cannabis use is so common that the current law is unworkable.**

✓ According to the British Crime Survey, 66% of people aged 16-59 in England and Wales have never used an illegal drug.²⁹ Also, the fact that a large number of people break a law is not a good reason for scrapping it. The Government is not proposing to abolish speed limits.

Cannabis up to 15 times stronger than in the 70s

The strength of a typical cannabis cigarette today is between six and **15 times** more potent than one used in the 1970s.

THC is Tetrahydrocannabinol, the main psychoactive ingredient of cannabis.

A typical 'joint' in the 1970s contained about 10mg of THC. Today it may contain anything from 60mg to over 150mg of THC.²⁷

Dramatic rise in dope-driving road deaths

Cannabis-related road deaths are rising at an alarming rate. Recent authoritative studies show a dramatic rise in cannabis use among drivers and its dangerous effects.

A British study by the Transport Research Laboratory in 2000 found drug-related road deaths have soared. Numbers are now six times higher than the mid-1980s.³⁰ The study showed that 18% of road deaths had traces of illicit drugs in the body, of which cannabis constituted two-thirds. A follow-on study in 2002 confirmed that cannabis adversely affects drivers tracking ability and overall capability.³¹ Cannabis greatly reduces concentration and the ability to focus on complex tasks such as driving and its effects can continue much longer than that of alcohol. Cannabis users can experience flashbacks several weeks after taking cannabis.³²

In March 2003 research in the Canadian Medical Association Journal concluded that driving after cannabis use is a risk that may be of similar magnitude to drink driving.³³ Drug driving is increasingly becoming a major concern to police forces across the UK and reclassification, which will inevitably result in cannabis being smoked more freely, can only make the problem worse.



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