

The day Britain lost the war on drugs: The liberals who left us a devastating legacy

By [Peter Hitchens](#)

The British Establishment formally surrendered to the drugs culture at a Cabinet meeting shortly before lunch on Thursday, February 26, 1970. It was the quiet end of a war that had been surprisingly brief and gentle, if not actually phoney.

Since that date there has been no serious official resistance to the view that the use of drugs, especially cannabis, is inevitable and not specially damaging.

It is generally accepted that those who use them are either the pitiable victims of others or are pursuing a reasonable pleasure that is no business of the State.

There has been an near-hysterical official hostility to the production and sale of the same drugs. But this hostility is made almost entirely futile by the law's leniency towards those who buy the very substance whose supply and sale is considered so villainous.

This contradictory, self-defeating hysteria has successfully given the impression – to credulous and ill-informed observers – that a non-existent 'War against Drugs' is taking place.

The idea is spread, in debate and in popular TV dramas such as *The Wire*, that most of the evils caused by drug abuse would end if we legalised drugs.

This change, it is argued, would break the connection between drugs and criminal gangs. It would also enable drugs to be sold in 'safe' quantities and without 'impurities'. This argument claims that the law, not the drug, is the problem.

A moment's thought shows that this argument is ridiculous. In one sense, all crimes are caused by laws. But the logic of 'less law, less crime' leaves out the issue of crime's unpleasant effects on its victims. It does not consider that there might be good reasons for laws against cannabis, ecstasy, cocaine and heroin.

The drugs named in the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 are illegal for a simple reason. The State still accepts that, even in their pure form, there is no safe dose.

Leaving aside its possible but unmeasured effects on mental health, cocaine, especially in its smoked form, has serious effects on the heart. In powder form it can physically destroy the user's nose. It is also associated with strokes, brain haemorrhages, hypothermia, agitated delirium, cardiac arrest, irregular heart rhythm and convulsions.

It might make people behave more badly than they would if they had not taken it: in an analysis of 1,000 people arrested for violent offences in Greater Manchester, more than 400 tested positive for cocaine use. Heroin is likewise extremely bad for the user's metabolism, general health and longevity, most especially if needles are shared with other users, as they often are.

Large-scale habitual users of all these drugs often (although not always) make themselves unfit for productive work. They become at one and the same time devoted to an expensive pleasure and unable to work to pay for it because they are either too stupefied or too agitated by the desire for more.

This is why they so often take to ruthless thieving, often from their own close family, and increasingly from the taxpayer, who provides them with methadone, a substitute pleasure.

This combination of costly indulgence and disinclination to work is surely one we should not encourage. But how else, apart from laws forbidding and punishing its possession, are we to do so effectively? Indulgence and so-called 'treatment' has certainly not done so.

Rather than compel the criminal drug user to abandon his habit, the authorities force bus drivers, postmen, doctors, nurses and school dinner ladies to buy stupefying drugs for criminal parasites, who would otherwise steal directly to obtain them.

The phrase 'legalised theft' can seldom have been more apt. The annual national bill for supplying drug-takers with methadone is roughly £300 million, not much less than the £380 million spent on trying to control the supply of illegal drugs.

The law has failed to deter, because it was severely weakened by the Cabinet decision of February 1970, and was from that time no longer really intended to discourage the use of any illegal drugs. It has been particularly weak against cannabis, because that drug has been given a special official status, which suggests to users that it is in some way 'safer' than other illegal drugs.

Cannabis has, from time to time, been reclassified from 'B' to 'C' and back to 'B'. But the significant part of the classification is the implication that – officially – cannabis is less risky than the bogeymen of the narcotic world, the Class 'A' substances such as heroin, LSD and cocaine.

The truth, if ever we find it out for certain, is more likely to be that cannabis carries a greater risk of irreversible damage than heroin or cocaine, and is at least as dangerous to the user's mental health as LSD, if not more so. The cannabis user can cause terrible distress to others. He could wreck his life and the lives of his friends and close family through irreversible mental illness. He could destroy his good prospects. Its use by teenagers is associated with under-achievement in school. Many who fail in school go on to fail in life, and so become an unquenchable grief to those who love them, and a costly burden to us all.

Campaigners for cannabis legalisation often claim that the drug, especially in comparison with alcohol, promotes peaceful behaviour. I am unconvinced by this broad claim, partly because of the frequent newspaper accounts of violent acts by people who are known cannabis users.

In some but by no means all of these cases, cannabis has been used with alcohol. This is not, I believe, uncommon among cannabis users and it must remain a matter of speculation which of the two drugs had the greater influence, or whether it was the combination of the two that destroyed the individual's inhibitions. There are also several cases, which I have for the most part set aside, of killings by mentally ill people who have been taking cannabis.

It is not possible to say whether they were ill in the first place because of cannabis, or whether they were already ill for some other reason, and cannabis has made their problems worse.

This raises the question of alcohol, a horribly damaging and dangerous drug which – being legal – devastates the lives of millions. If alcohol had recently been invented and was as widely used as cannabis is now in our society, I would support the most severe legal measures to penalise its use and drive it out of our society.

But alcohol is too well-established here for such measures to work. A key part of this debate is involved here. Once a substance is legalised, it is extremely difficult to declare that it is illegal. That is why we should be so careful about legalising currently illegal drugs. If this turns out to be a mistake, it will not easily be put right. In the late Sixties and early Seventies there remained a stubborn and very large section of the population that still held to the old values. Even now, in the second decade of the 21st Century, a powerful minority (I suspect it is a dwindling one) remains unreformed on the subject of drugs.

However, as the restrictions of wartime weakened and the post-war generation got its hands on the controls of cultural power, a few rich, successful, famous and glamorous people began to take drugs. They enjoyed them, believed they did them no harm and saw no reason why they should not continue to do so.

A strange series of events was to align these rather trivial and silly people with a very serious campaign to change the world. The campaign began in 1967. It exploded into prominence with an extraordinary full-page advertisement in The Times on July 24 of that year. The Times, then, was a newspaper whose reputation was far greater than it is possible to imagine now.

The advertisement called for the legalisation of cannabis, and bore the signatures of all four members of The Beatles (each mentioning their recently awarded MBE decorations), the artists John Piper and David Hockney, the Tory politician Jonathan Aitken, the Nobel prizewinner Francis Crick, Labour MPs Brian Walden and Tom Driberg, theatre director Peter Brook, TV producer Tony Garnett, the novelist Graham Greene, broadcaster David Dimbleby, the revolutionary student leader Tariq Ali, journalist and TV presenter Brian Inglis, the theatre critic Kenneth Tynan, the publisher Tom Maschler, the psychiatrists Anthony Storr and R. D. Laing, the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, among several others.

Many celebrities still endorse the unending campaign for weaker drugs laws or the sympathetic treatment of drug abusers. Businessman Sir Richard Branson is an open supporter. So is comedian Russell Brand, who was invited to testify to the Commons Home Affairs Committee.

He argued for decriminalisation of drug possession, and said heroin abusers should be treated with compassion. The Times advertisement coincided with the other drug drama of 1967: the arrest of two of the Rolling Stones. Mick Jagger and Keith Richards were first imprisoned and then rapidly released on bail pending appeal.

The day after their release, the famous 'Who Breaks a Butterfly On a Wheel' (the headline misquoted Alexander Pope's line 'upon a wheel') leading article was published in The Times. William Rees-Mogg, the editor at the time, thought Jagger's possession of an amphetamine bought abroad was not serious.

Something certainly changed the general attitude towards drugs, which had been confined to insignificant fringe minorities for the first two-thirds of the 20th Century. Although it is hard to believe now, Britain had no significant drug problem at all before 1964.

According to the Wootton Report (whose full and significant title was 'Report of the Hallucinogens sub-committee of the Advisory Committee on Drug Dependence', published on January 3, 1969), United Kingdom convictions for cannabis possession stood at four in the whole year of 1945, rising to 79 in 1950, 235 in 1960 and 626 in 1965. Then something happened. In 1966, the figure almost doubled to 1,119, and in 1967 doubled again to 2,393. Government figures show a rapid increase in cannabis arrests in the United Kingdom, from 51 in 1957 to 2,393 in 1967. By 1972, they would reach 12,599.

Yet these figures are as nothing to those that followed the full implementation of the Wootton Report. By 2009 there would be almost 163,000 cannabis arrests in England and Wales alone. And these would take place despite a general lack of interest by the police in troubling cannabis users at all.

Baroness Wootton was the pioneer Left-wing battleaxe. Her greatest and most damaging achievement in a long life of radical campaigning would be to give official force to the baseless and scientifically absurd belief that cannabis is a 'soft' drug, not to be bracketed with 'hard' substances such as cocaine and heroin.

Her committee invented the system, unique to Britain, of classification, which has ever since been part of the country's drug laws. Its bias leaps from almost every page.

This was evident to the then Home Secretary, Jim Callaghan, who acted to forestall the report before it was published. He said on January 23, 1969 in the House of Commons: 'To reduce the penalties for possession, sale or supply of cannabis would be bound to lead people to think that the Government takes a less than serious view of the effects of drug taking.'

It is almost impossible to believe that Callaghan willingly submitted to defeat at the hands of his Cabinet colleagues a year later at that meeting in February 1970.

It was the only time the Labour Cabinet ever split on class lines. The party's working-class trade unionists wanted to carry on the fight. Its middle-class, university-educated radicals wanted to give in. The middle class won, as they have almost ever since, in Labour's internal squabbles.

And their decision would be endorsed by Ted Heath's even more middle-class Tory Cabinet six months later.

The Bill, which became the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, had survived a General Election and passed from a Labour government to a Tory government.

Here is what Jim Callaghan said as his own Bill, which he had reluctantly piloted to the Commons, returned there under new management: 'The plain truth is, as far as I know it and as far as the most recent market research that I have seen has gone, that over 90 per cent of young people are in favour of stringent penalties against those who smoke "pot".'

So ended the last serious argument ever to be offered by a senior member of the British Establishment, against the de facto legalisation of one of the most dangerous drugs known to man.