

## Reefer madness: Do the drug laws work?

Defying the weight of medical and scientific opinion, Gordon Brown is to order tougher new laws today on cannabis possession. The Prime Minister has decided to overrule his own expert advisers and reverse the downgrading four years ago of Britain's favourite illegal drug from a class B to a class C substance, threatening cannabis smokers with five-year prison terms.

His announcement comes amid fears that Britain is in the grip of an epidemic of cannabis-induced psychosis. This is based on the conviction that the cannabis sold on the streets is stronger than it was a generation ago and is tipping increasing numbers of vulnerable people into mental illness, including schizophrenia.

Headlines proclaiming that skunk is 20 to 30 times as strong as the cannabis smoked in the 1970s have fuelled public alarm. The Prime Minister has spoken of the "lethal" effects of the new strains, as if they were comparable with the harm caused by heroin and crack cocaine.

Yet there is no epidemic of psychosis rates have actually declined since the mid 1990s. Almost three million people a year use cannabis; very few develop psychosis. Despite this, parents are more worried today that their children will become schizophrenic if they smoke cannabis than they were five years ago.

The new focus on the harm caused by cannabis is to be welcomed, as there are reasons for concern. What has united medical specialists and drug workers is the conviction that whether cannabis is classified B or C is an irrelevance. Worse, it could distract attention from the central issue, which is the need to educate young people about the risks. Mr Brown's announcement, which ministers believe will be popular with the Middle Britain voters who deserted Labour last week was endorsed by the Cabinet yesterday. It would mean the maximum penalty for possession of cannabis rising from two to five years.

Jacqui Smith, the Home Secretary, will argue that the about-turn is necessary because of the increasing strength of cannabis in circulation. She is also expected to warn that it can act as a "gateway" drug to more addictive substances. But ministers were accused last night of using the classification system, which places illegal substances into three categories according to their harm, to score points against their opponents.

Shortly after arriving in Downing Street in June last year, Mr Brown announced a review by the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD) of the status of cannabis, making clear that he wanted its reclassification from B to C reversed. That decision had been taken in 2004 by David Blunkett when he was Home Secretary, and was meant to free police time squandered on prosecuting users. Mr Brown believed it sent the wrong message to young people. But the advisory council

reached the opposite conclusion last month in a report sent to the Home Office in which it said cannabis should remain in class C. It dismissed the argument that downgrading the drug had sent a confusing message to the public and said the link between heavy cannabis use and mental illness was unproven.

Despite the advisory council's refusal to support moving cannabis up a category, the Prime Minister has made clear he is intent on doing so, last week describing much of the stronger "skunk" variety of cannabis as "of a lethal quality".

His concern about the dangers chimes with that of psychiatrists treating the victims of drug-induced psychosis, but his remedy does not. Doctors have been worried for at least a decade about the impact of cannabis on mental health. It is our most widely used illegal drug and studies show that the cannabis available on the streets is stronger than it used to be though not as strong as some have claimed. Skunk, which is now ubiquitous, contains at least 14 per cent of tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) compared with about 6 per cent in 1995 (and 3 per cent in the herbal cannabis available in the 1970s). That makes it two or three times as strong as it was a decade ago, not 30 times.

Some 80 per cent of people with schizophrenia smoke cannabis, but this does not prove that it causes the illness. Many sufferers use it to self-medicate. The drug may aggravate their symptoms, but there is conflicting evidence about its role in causation. In its last review in 2006, the advisory council concluded: "The evidence suggests at worst that using cannabis increases the lifetime risk of developing schizophrenia by less than 1 per cent."

Its new report is expected to accept that the skunk that now dominates the market in the southern cities is stronger than in the past. In addition, a pooled analysis of 35 studies published in *The Lancet* in June found that cannabis users were 40 per cent more likely to develop a psychotic illness than non users, and the risk was doubled in heavy users. On that basis the researchers seven psychiatrists from Bristol, Cardiff, London and Cambridge estimated that 14 per cent of cases of schizophrenia might be due to cannabis.

The psychiatrists admitted they could not prove cause and effect but concluded that there was "now enough evidence to inform people that using cannabis could increase their risk of developing psychotic illness later in life". Professor Robin Murray of the Institute of Psychiatry, a leading exponent of cannabis-induced psychosis, welcomed the finding but said it underplayed the risks from the stronger skunk now available: "My own experience suggests the risk with skunk is higher. Therefore the estimate that 14 per cent of cases of schizophrenia in the UK are due to cannabis is now probably an understatement."

A second factor is that cannabis contains two main psychoactive ingredients THC and cannabidiol the second of which is thought to have anti-psychotic effects. Skunk contains almost no cannabidiol.

Others have challenged The Lancet finding, pointing out that there has been no significant increase in the incidence of schizophrenia over the past 30 years, despite a sharp increase in cannabis use. A review of trends in the UK by the University of Keele, commissioned by the ACMD, found that cases of schizophrenia fell between 1996 and 2005. Cannabis use also fell during this period but the researchers say evidence from case control studies is inconsistent and the two trends cannot be linked.

While the role of cannabis in psychosis remains a matter of dispute, there is broad agreement over the issue of classification.

Most specialists accept there is no scientific basis for altering the advisory council's 2006 conclusion that cannabis is "substantially" less harmful than the class B drugs amphetamines and barbiturates and should therefore remain in class C. Drug and mental health charities agree that the law is too blunt an instrument to deliver public health warnings, and have called for education campaigns to warn young people of the risks. They point out that consumption of cannabis has fallen 4 per cent since 2003, after being downgraded to class C in 2004.

Mr Brown will cite the support of the Association of Chief Police Officers (Acpo), which has changed its position on the classification of cannabis, after backing Mr Blunkett's decision to downgrade the drug from B to C four years ago. But Acpo said last week that it would not revert to the days when cannabis possession technically gave rise to automatic arrest, which wasted so much police time that it was often ignored, and wanted officers to retain the option of cautioning cannabis users, a stance which could lead to accusations that it would become a class B substance in name only.

The Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs was set up in 1971 at the same time as the current drugs classification system was established. When Mr Brown overturns its conclusions today, it will only be the second time the committee has been overridden by a government.

Martin Barnes, the chief executive of the charity Drugscope, made a final appeal last night for the Government to abide by the advisory council's conclusions. "We remain unpersuaded that a move back to class B is the best way to reduce cannabis harms and levels of use, particularly among young people," he said.

Roger Howard, chief executive of the UK Drug Policy Commission, said: "The system of drugs classification is now at risk of becoming discredited by political point-scoring and false expectations of the benefits any changes in classification will bring. It is not an effective way to 'send a message' to young people. The Government ought to review the system, as it promised to do in 2006, and consider options which return independent scientific analysis to the core of future classification decisions."

The Labour MP Paul Flynn, called for a complete overhaul of the approach to drug addiction, arguing the current classification system was irrelevant to helping addicts kick their habit. He said: "Banging people up in prison doesn't work. The message that Gordon Brown will be sending out is that he doesn't understand drugs and doesn't understand the problem, so he's going to try to win a few cheap headlines."

The advisory council called for cannabis to be downgraded as early as 1979, but Margaret Thatcher's government said it would never reduce drugs penalties. It was not until Mr Blunkett became convinced that cannabis was unnecessarily diverting police resources, that he announced the reclassification four years ago. But his three successors have been uncomfortable with the decision. Charles Clarke came close to reversing it, asking for evidence of links with mental illness, but backed off on advice from the ACMD.

Last night, the Tories backed the reclassification, but said it had to be properly backed up by police enforcement. David Davis, the shadow Home Secretary, said: "If young people still believe it is OK to take the drug and law enforcement agencies fail adequately to deter and prosecute the misuse of cannabis then Gordon Brown will have failed another test of leadership."

What the experts say

Deborah Cameron chief executive, Addaction

There is a contradiction at the heart of the Government's policy on cannabis. The classification system has distracted politicians for too long we need to get back to tackling the actual harm drugs cause.

Chris Huhne Lib Dem Home Affairs spokesman

Instead of pandering to tabloid newspaper editors, the Government should be listening to the independent experts. There is no point wasting taxpayers' money on having the Advisory Council if their advice is ignored.

Lord Ramsbottom Former Chief Inspector of prisons

You've got to have a coherent strategy that looks across all drugs and targets them in proportion to the damage they do. It's no good isolating cannabis... I simply do not believe that prohibition works.

Martin Barnes Chief executive of Drugscope

One of my concerns is that the Government should go against the Advisory Council's advice and reinforce the cannabis scare stories. Cannabis is not a harmless drug, far from it. That is why it is already illegal.

Paul Flynn Labour MP, Newport West

Banging people up in prison doesn't work. The message that Gordon Brown will be sending out is that he doesn't understand the problem, so he's going to try to win a few cheap headlines.

Dr Brian Iddon Labour MP, Bolton South East

This will create further confusion. This government claims its policies were based on evidence, but the Advisory Council has provided the evidence and the Government is going to ignore it.

Richard Garside Centre for Crime and Justice Studies, King's College London

If drug classification was based on harm caused to society then alcohol would be higher than some class-B drugs. It sets out the principles for which drugs are socially acceptable.

Mark Steel Comedian and columnist

It's crackers. The only reason Gordon Brown's doing it is because otherwise the Daily Mail will have more ammunition against him. Most people under 60 must have smoked it. That would make everyone criminals.

Colin Blakemore Professor of Neuroscience, Oxford University

Gordon Brown has been a great supporter of science. It is a pity that he has allowed his heart to rule his head in his desire to reclassify Britain's most popular illegal drug.

Tim Kendall Deputy director of research, Royal College of Psychiatrists

The debate about classification is at best a useless distraction and at worst a diversion of attention and resources from the far bigger problems of crack cocaine and heroin.

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Irrational headline grabbing \*\*\*\*\* , listen to the experts!! I would have more respect for you and your party if you simply hadn't bothered with them in the

first place. I assure you this law change will make no difference to cannabis use and the associated 'problems'. 'lethal quality' we dont like being lied to Mr Brown!

I am a user of cannabis and legalisation is clearly the only way to regulate and control cannabis use. How much damage has been caused due to contamination and the illegal industry you create with these nonsensical 'classifications'? Protect the people Mr Brown!

I am very much looking forward to not voting for labour again!

Posted by dabudda

Everyone except the paranoid know cannabis does no harm.

What they should be paranoid about is.....

If I was just selling weed well... I would now be selling everything thats grade B.

May as well get hung for a sheep as get hung for a lamb.

Perhaps If I put it like this. If I started an illegal war in Iraq I wouldn't have any problem starting an illegal war in Iran. Then Mr Brown and crew will understand what I mean.

Posted by Noel

The quality of cannabis and marijuana in the 60's 70's and 80's was far higher than nowadays. Back then there was a choice, from different parts of the World. That choice is no longer available.

It is all too clear what the problems are regarding drugs, heroin and crack cocaine are the real killers, time and resources spent on cannabis detection will surely allow the harder substances an easier entry into the UK. Perhaps the over-use of alcohol should be examined more objectively.

Posted by Arthur

Socially acceptable drugs such as Tobacco equate to 340,000-425,000 deaths per year.

Alcohol is a 150,000+ deaths per year not to mention the mount of fights and injuries that alcohol is mainly responsible for.

After 5000 years of documented Cannabis use, there have been no reported deaths that have stemmed from Marijuana use.

There has been lots of cases all over ther U.K were the is contaminated cannabis flooding the market sprayed with many things from glass to sugar.

It should be legalized so they can make i safe and stop the criminal gangs profiting.

Also this would free up lots of space in prisons for the people that have done far worse crimes.

Posted by Danny

Cool website! I found lots of interesting things here, nice site! Good work. Thanks much!

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Posted by babichartoon

A feared hoody of middle England gets caught with Cannabis then let off with no punishment. Doesn't that send the message that all Class B drugs are ok and the Police won't punish for possession of speed e.t.c?

This Government is so stupid. Brown is trying desperately to claw back some voter respect, fortunately he will never get back into power. Labour are dead.

Posted by Byron

For years we've been told that cannabis smokers lose all their drive and ambition . Lately we've been told that cannabis makes its users psychotic .

Well, as a cannabis smoker for nearly 20 years, I feel the need to point out that I find most driven and ambitious people to be pompous, arrogant, obnoxious twits. One only has to look at our politicians!

Oh, and I didn't start the war in Iraq, by the way...

Posted by Lungful

United States registered brand QUIISM licensed health breathing.

Health is a non-nicotine cigarettes a new, health care absorption of green goods, it has Ginkgo biloba, chrysanthemums, Artemisia argyi as the main raw material, scientific compatibility variety of luxurious vanilla, a high-tech biotechnology extract made from the cigarette substitute Commodities. With Qingyan expectorant, refreshing Xingnao, the prevention of respiratory disease, can help smokers change containing harmful nicotine in tobacco smoking habit, nicotine in tobacco to reduce the harm to human health and reduce the dependence on nicotine tobacco, and ultimately achieving natural Stop smoking or tobacco control purposes.

## About the Author

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