**Language and Taboo**

*Resource:*

<http://www.thesite.org/drink-and-drugs/drugs-trade/should-drugs-be-legalised-9802.html>

**Should drugs be legalised?**

The legalisation of drugs is a contentious issue, so who better to fight it out than the crime prevention minister and a man who wrote a book about cocaine?

Legalising weed is pretty popular - anyone surprised?

Drugs legislation in this country is pretty simple. In short, you’re not supposed to do drugs, and if you do the Government will try and stop you (with the confusing exception of booze and cigarettes, which are, of course, legal). But many people – including political figures – are [arguing that the war on drugs is failing](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/health/healthnews/8394560/Its-time-to-decriminalise-drug-use-say-peers.html) and we need to look at decriminalising drugs and helping addicts, rather than demonising them.

So, should drugs be legalised, made readily available and taxed like any other product? Or would this just turn us all into a country full of wasters? Drugs trade expert Tom Feiling and former crime prevention minister James Brokenshire give us their point of view.

**Why drugs should be legalised**

[**Tom Feiling**](http://www.tomfeiling.com/)**, author of*Candy Machine: How Cocaine Took over the World* (Penguin, 2009) believes drugs should be made legal.**

“The prohibition of drugs is a failure. Crop eradication programmes have failed to reduce coca, opium poppy or [cannabis](http://www.thesite.org/drink-and-drugs/drugs-a-z/cannabis-9963.html%20) cultivation. The penalties haven’t deterred producers or traffickers. Drug prohibition was supposed to push up the price of drugs, making them too expensive for users. That hasn’t happened. It was supposed to send a message that drug use isn’t socially acceptable, but that hasn’t happened either. Instead, young people learn to flaunt the law and whatever passes for drug education at school, so most of them are not well-informed when they choose to take illegal drugs.

Drug prohibition has turned drug production and distribution into highly lucrative enterprises. The inflated profits made by drugs traffickers allow them to bribe their way through countries like Mexico, Colombia and Afghanistan. Legalisation would have a positive impact on the corruption and violence those countries have to deal with.

Legalisation would get a significant number of low-level, non-violent drug offenders out of jail. There would be no more drug dealers, hitmen, runners or smugglers. The police could re-focus their energies on fighting real crime, and the police and prison systems could be scaled back. The UK would become a safer and less violent country.

People worry that legalising drugs means drug use would go through the roof. But the [decriminalisation of hard drugs in Portugal](http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/thereporters/markeaston/2009/07/how_portugal_treats_drug_addic.html) has not led to an increase in the numbers of people taking those drugs. People who want to take drugs are already taking them.

Legalisation implies regulation and control: that’s what laws are for. We already do a pretty good job of controlling other dangerous substances. You don’t need the law to tell you that becoming an alcoholic is not big or clever. We trust in effective education, high taxes and a ban on sale to minors to control alcohol consumption. Tobacco use is in decline thanks to effective education and changing social mores; nobody suggests that the best way to reduce cancer deaths is by making tobacco illegal.

But drug legalisation can only work as part of a sea-change in our attitudes to intoxication and self-harm. Drug dependency has its roots in poverty, neglect and hopelessness – social problems that can – and should – be tackled. But you can’t ‘prohibit’ them any more than you can ‘prohibit’ people from taking drugs.”

**Why drugs should stay illegal**

**James Brokenshire, former Minister for Crime Prevention, explains why the Home Office keeps drugs illegal.**

“Drugs are illegal in almost every country in the world because they are dangerous, both to those who take them and the wider community. As a Home Office minister, it’s my responsibility to help protect the public from the very damaging health and social harms we know drugs cause.

The majority of people don’t take drugs – decriminalisation would send out the wrong message, especially to our young people, that it was somehow ‘alright’ to take drugs. Our aim is to support people – especially young people – to steer clear of drugs, not to encourage people to take them.

If such drugs were to become legally available they would become easier to access and levels of supply and use would rise significantly, along with the associated harms and cost to individuals and society.

Drugs are harmful to health, whatever their purity and dosage; this is why the Government takes legislative steps to reduce their availability in order to protect public health. Those who seek to use them already place themselves in harm’s way. It’s also naive to think that a system of regulated supply would eliminate the crimes committed by organised career criminals. Such criminals would simply seek new sources of illicit revenue through crime, not least in illicit drug supply and trafficking amid the increase in demand that would follow decriminalisation.

Secondly, the UK’s drug laws provide the opportunity for the criminal justice system to offer problem drug users interventions, like the treatment of their addiction, alongside support to address things such as mental health and family issues. This can have a positive effect in reducing drug misuse and related crime, and make a real difference to the quality of life of these individuals and their communities.

A regulated market for drugs through controlled outlets (e.g. licensed pharmacies) would provide the opportunity for tax revenue. However, establishing the level of taxation would be difficult. Setting the price too high would open the door for the illegal markets, while setting it too low could feed that same market. Regulation also carries its own administrative and enforcement costs, which would be substantial.

We acknowledge alcohol and tobacco account for more health problems and deaths than illegal drugs, as well as being a cause of crime and disorder. This is why we intervene in many ways to prevent and minimise these harms, including by restricting sales through our licensing laws.

However, the way these substances are regulated is embedded in historical tradition and a tolerance of responsible consumption. The licensing controls on these substances remain acceptable to the vast majority of people. The way weregulatealcohol and tobacco therefore remains distinct from the way we control illicit drugs.

Our view is that the UK’s drugs policy has not failed. For the past four decades our drugs laws have served us well, limiting the demand and supply of all drugs and reducing the harm caused to dependent users and society.”

*This interview took place in 2011, but drug policy hasn’t changed since then – we’ll update it if it does!*

 *Guiding Questions:*

1. Why and How might opinions and views of this issue be Different for each person? (ex. Parent, police man/woman, youth, drug users, etc).
2. Why is a certain audience shocked by the use of certain language?
3. How is language used to break taboos?
4. Is it fair to Negatively judge a person because they use drugs? Does this Define the type of person they are?
5. Based Solely on the points each side has given, do YOU think drugs should be legalized?
6. What do taboos say about cultural values and shared beliefs?