

IDPC Briefing on UK Launch of Drugs and Democracy Report

The International Drug Policy Consortium (IDPC) is a global network of NGOs and professional networks that specialise in issues related to illegal drug production and use. The Consortium aims to promote objective and open debate on the effectiveness, direction and content of drug policies at national and international level, and supports evidence-based policies that are effective in reducing drug-related harm. It produces occasional briefing papers, disseminates the reports of its member organisations about particular drug-related matters, and offers expert consultancy services to policymakers and officials around the world.

On 28th May 2009, Chatham House hosted the UK launch of *Drugs and Democracy: Toward a Paradigm Shift* – the report of the Latin American Commission on Drugs and Democracy. The event was led by Fernando Henrique Cardoso*, former president of Brazil, joined by Mike Trace, IDPC Chair, as discussant and chaired by Professor Victor Bulmer-Thomas, Associate Fellow, Americas, Chatham House.

The report of the Commission – constituted by former presidents César Gaviria of Colombia, Ernesto Zedillo of Mexico and Mr Cardoso of Brazil and supported by 17 independent luminaries – puts forward the findings of their impact assessment on the ‘war on drugs’, as follows:

- A rise in organised crime caused both by the international narcotics trade and the growing control exercised by criminal groups over domestic markets and territories;
- A growth in unacceptable levels of drug-related violence affecting the whole of society and, in particular, the poor and the young;
- The criminalisation of politics and the politicization of crime, as well as the proliferation of the linkages between them, as reflected in the infiltration of democratic institutions by organized crime; and,
- The corruption of public servants, the judicial system, governments, the political system and, especially the police forces in charge of enforcing law and order.

The conclusion is that the ‘war on drugs’ is ‘a failed war’ and calls for acknowledgment of this fact and the engagement of civil society and public opinion so that a debate on safer, more efficient and humane drug policies can take place. In terms of what those new policies might look like, the recommendation is for a new paradigm where: drug users are treated as a matter of public health; drug consumption is reduced through information, education and prevention; and repression is focused on organised crime.

* Fernando Henrique Cardoso, a member of the Elders, was Senator, Minister of Foreign Relations, Minister of Finance and President of Brazil for two terms (1995-2002). A Doctor in Sociology and professor at the University of São Paulo, he was president of the International Association of Sociology and visiting professor at the universities of California, Berkeley, *Collège de France*, Paris, Stanford, Cambridge, Paris-Nanterre, FLACSO, ILPES and CEPAL, in Santiago, Chile. Mr Cardoso has been president of the Club of Madrid (2003/06), and served on the Panel of Eminent Persons on United Nations-Civil Society Relations (2003/04) the UN Panel for Revitalization of UNCTAD (2005/06).

Mr Cardoso, presenting the report, left the audience at Chatham House in no doubt as to the urgency of the debate - that it is no longer a question of the unintended negative consequences of the war on drugs or of collateral damage. Drug related crime and violence in Mexico and the favelas of Rio have reached intolerable levels and the politicisation of crime and level of corruption is such that the democracy in several Latin American countries is undermined; a shift in paradigm is imperative.

Mr Cardoso stated that the answer must involve decriminalisation of consumption and particularly cannabis. This would, he said, accurately reflect the harm that can be caused by cannabis, undermine the economic foundations of organised crime, redirect interest and money to fight it, and enable an effective public health and prevention approach.

Mr Cardoso explained the lessons that could be learnt from Brasil's successful reduction in new HIV transmissions and the tougher regulation of tobacco, in particular: governments should work with civil society; and, public information campaigns should be clear and honest. Like the message on HIV went from 'no sex' to 'safe sex' and transmissions went down, the same harm reduction approach, Mr Cardoso suggested, should be applied to drugs.

The long-term solution for the drug problem, identified by the Commission, is to reduce the demand for drugs in the main consumer countries. We stand, said Mr Cardoso, at a crucial moment with a US move towards co-responsibility and concrete policy shifts in both Latin America and Europe; we must seize it.

Mike Trace linked the work of the Commission to the international context describing how the themes and conclusions of the Commission exist also within the international drug policy debates. In particular, the global data is now clear that the current enforcement-led drug policy has not led to a sustainable reduction of the drug problem. Nevertheless, the UN system has found confronting this uncomfortable reality difficult and in March this year recommitted to 10 years more of the same strategy. This result is the product of system wide incoherence within the UN and a fear to act where there is no simple solution. The consensus is however, fatally fractured, said Mike Trace, and the responsibility of policy makers is to find a strategy that is fit for purpose in the 21st century, rather than seeking to defend the status quo.

The debate that followed touched on a number of themes including: prioritisation of aims; social control; what makes for effective and ethical prevention; the rights of drug users as against their responsibilities; the tenacity of organised crime with the shift to synthetic substances and to new territories; the rights of indigenous populations; and, environmental concerns.

In particular, Mr Cardoso asserted that reduction of drug use must be the priority aim and that the inevitable trade off between this aim and that of reducing the harms of prohibition through decriminalisation could be countered by prevention measures. Prevention measures such as stigmatisation, however, were roundly dismissed by those in attendance as being ineffective and contrary to the public health objective not to mention an affront to the dignity of the drug user. Mike Trace suggested that anywhere in the world where a more liberal approach has been taken, the impact on levels of use has been marginal and other voices added that the concern should not be the size of the numbers of people using drugs as the way the drugs are being used.

There appeared to be an acceptance amongst those in attendance that there is widespread social and recreational drug use which does not tally with the war on drugs ethos. It was suggested that new social values must therefore be created through education about the harms caused by drugs both directly to the user and in the wider social context and through stressing to drug users their responsibility for those wider harms. The point was made, however, that if the political class in the UK tried to assert such moral

authority at this point, the public would laugh. Who has the moral authority to make such connections was a question that went unanswered.

The answer to the broader problem is clear however – if only the same openness, transparency and willingness for debate found at this event and espoused by the Commission, could be found within the Commission for Narcotic Drugs and within domestic governments, then there might be a way forward towards a more humane and less harmful drug policy.