

Talking About Cannabis

Speech by

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at the Talking About Cannabis Briefing Meeting held in the Boothroyd Room,
Portcullis House, House of Commons, Westminster, London SW1 0AA on 30
October 2007

May I begin my short remarks by thanking Debra Bell for organising this meeting and for bringing us all here today to discuss what is an increasingly important and increasingly worrying issue? You have already heard from experts in the subject, doctors, teachers and police officers and from interested MPs, and all of you in the room will have your own experiences and concerns that you may wish to share with us, the better to inform the debate about the perils of cannabis use and abuse.

I am the Shadow Minister for Justice and in that role I speak for the Conservative Party about the criminal justice system and, in particular, our prisons. Since December 2005 when David Cameron became Leader of my Party and he appointed me to this task - although until May of this year when the Ministry of Justice was created out of and with a remit separate from the Home Office, I was part of the Home Affairs team – I have been to about 30 prisons, young offender institutions and secure training centres.

But I do not approach this issue only as a Shadow Minister or even as a constituency MP. I have been at the Bar since 1976 and, although my practice has mostly been limited to the civil courts dealing with the laws of defamation - libel and slander – as well as those on privacy and confidence, what we now grandly call media law and the application of Articles 8 and 10 of the ECHR, acting for and against broadcasters, newspapers and book publishers and more recently internet service providers, I have for the last 10 or so years been a Crown Court Recorder, a part time judge, trying criminal cases with juries in courts here in central London. Many of the cases that I try involve drugs and many of the defendants that juries convict end up in jail.

You may or may not know that a huge percentage of the people in custody, indeed the majority of them, be they teenagers or adults, male or female, are in custody because of some connection with illegal drugs. They have been convicted of possession, of possession with intent to supply, of importing, manufacturing or growing illegal drugs or they have been convicted of offences such as theft, burglary and robbery – crimes of acquisition – committed in order to fund a drug habit. About 65% of the population inside our custodial estate took drugs before going inside and a very large proportion of prisoners consume drugs during their sentences. And they carry on taking them when they leave prison. Alcohol and drugs are the biggest drivers of crime today - drugs tend to be behind acquisitive crimes and alcohol behind crimes of violence.

Worse, these afflictions, these addictions, these abuses of human health very often mask mental illness. About three quarters of prisoners suffer from one or two diagnosable mental illnesses – by that I mean more than sadness or anger at having been caught and locked up or taken away from family and friends. These are people who are seriously mentally ill and many of them ought to be in secure mental hospitals rather than prison but the hard fact is that they are in prison for

committing crimes sufficiently serious to warrant a custodial sentence. Many of them have been to prison before, many of them are persistent re-offenders and many of them are drug addicts who cannot or will not come off drugs either inside or outside prison. Many of them will come back to prison after release and many of them will die young.

As it happens most drug users inside prison do not take cannabis, unless they cannot get hold of something else, because it remains within the blood stream and the body for days and even weeks and thus renders the user open to discovery. Class A drugs like heroin, cocaine and crack are the drugs of choice since they pass through the body more quickly and the chances of detection, if not negligible, are a good deal smaller than is the case for cannabis. Drugs arrive into our prisons in a huge variety of ways, some obvious, some less obvious, but however they get in there seems to be plenty of them available for inmates to use and to trade in prison. We need to do more to prevent drugs getting into prisons and we need to do more to get prisoners off drugs and to stay off drugs once they arrive in prison. It is significant that a literally captive audience of drug users cannot be got off drugs whilst in prison and that for many of them life as a drug user inside is very little different from life outside as a drug user.

Most people in prison have had little formal education, many have been excluded or were truants and over a quarter have been in state or local authority care as children. But drug use and cannabis use, are not, as many of the parents and individuals here can testify, restricted to the uneducated, the poor and recidivist criminals. In my constituency, there is an unemployment rate of about 1%. Most people, although clearly not millionaires, are not so poor that they resort to crime to feed themselves and their families. Most people have good housing and live within strong families. But my constituency has its share of drug users and dealers and of drug-driven crime. I know streets near schools where drugs are bought and sold and then consumed by youngsters barely old enough to travel on public transport unaccompanied by an adult; I know pub car parks where drugs can be traded and I have seen culverts, drains and even recreation grounds where used needles have been thrown away but still are a danger to children. Of course I have pockets of deprivation and poverty and people who have low reading and numeracy skills but they are not necessarily wracked by drug abuse; indeed they are often the proudest and most independent-minded people.

But what I do have are teenagers tempted by easily available cannabis, who once started on the downward spiral of drug use find it very difficult to achieve anything, let alone anything fulfilling or useful, in their lives. And as we have heard from my fellow speakers this afternoon the strength and destructive power of the cannabis smoked nowadays is a good deal greater than what it was in the 1960's and 70's. There is far too much evidence of a link between serious mental illness and breakdown, even schizophrenia, and prolonged cannabis use, but even short of serious illness we know that cannabis addiction causes physical ill health, family breakdown, and immense sadness and leads to untold misery and anti-social behaviour. Debra Bell has spoken today about her family's sadness and sense of loss and her courageous younger son will tell us how he has been affected by his brother's drug habit.

These are just some of the personal tragedies that describe the effect of cannabis use on real human beings, the drug users themselves, parents, children, siblings, grandparents, friends and wider communities even before you consider the ways in which these issues touch our criminal justice system, our courts and our prisons. We are not talking of the rich and famous, we are not talking about pop stars and tabloid celebrities, we are talking about your neighbours and mine and we are talking about real damage and lasting distress.

Today is about spreading the message and imparting knowledge. Today is about giving each other the strength and determination not to give up in the struggle to prevent more and more young people from being brought down by drug abuse and today is about thanking all of you for coming here, but especially my fellow speakers, for giving up their time to come and give us the benefit of their knowledge and expertise.