

Drugs and Democracy: A Comment

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As Caribbean countries struggle to cope with an ever-rising tide of criminal violence connected to international narcotrafficking, a [new report](#), from a commission co-chaired by three former Latin American presidents, has been published with proposals that constitute a major departure from existing policies.

The report declares bluntly that while 'the war on drugs has failed'; its alarming side-effects have been to foment violent turf wars among rival transnational gangs, corrupt justice and law enforcement systems and increasingly threaten to subvert the hemisphere's fragile democracies.

The authors propose a 'new paradigm' based on three main directives: (a) treating drug users as a matter of public health; (b) reducing drug consumption through information, education and prevention; and (c) focusing repression on organized crime. Accordingly, its three main policy recommendations are to:

1. Change the status of addicts from drug buyers in the illegal market to that of patients cared for in the public health system
2. Evaluate from a public health standpoint and on the basis of the most advanced medical science the convenience of decriminalizing the possession of cannabis for personal use.
3. Reduce consumption through campaigns of information and prevention that can be understood and accepted by young people, who account for the largest contingent of users.

Several elements of the recommended new paradigm are in accordance with the views of knowledgeable public health and criminal justice professionals in our region. Some time ago, for instance, a Jamaican Commission chaired by Professor Barry Chevannes of the UWI recommended the decriminalisation of cannabis possession in small quantities for personal use. The proposal was shot down by the U.S. Ambassador to Kingston before it had been even seriously discussed. And that was that.

It is regrettable, therefore, that among the Commission's 17 members, there was no one from the Caribbean, a region that obviously has a great interest in this subject. The Commission's analysis of the shifting pattern of supply routes from Bolivia and Peru to Colombia and Mexico, for instance, is one that has great relevance to Caribbean islands and mainland countries that sit astride these routes. One also wonders whether a great opportunity was not missed at the recent Vth Summit of the Americas to debate the Commission's recommendations and to forge a common Latin American and Caribbean position in talks with the United States; where the principal markets are located and whose collaboration is an essential requirement for the 'new paradigm' to work. As the authors of the report themselves point out, the arrival of the Barack Obama Administration presents an opportunity to engage the United States in a dialogue on the subject that is not coloured by the preconceptions and prejudices of the Bush era.

These lacunae notwithstanding, this should not be an obstacle to seriously examining the recommendations from this report, to consider forging a common Caricom position on them, and to engage our neighbours in the wider Caribbean and in the hemisphere on them. There is, quite simply, too much at stake, as the depressing daily diet of news on ghastly murders attest.

We are by this means hoping to draw public and governmental attention to this report (a copy is being sent to the Caricom Secretariat) and we are inviting all readers of this comment to bring it to the attention of government officials, the media, and whomever else may be able to 'make a difference'.

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Link to [Report of Latin American Commission on Drugs and Democracy](#)