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DRUGS POLICY

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DEBATING MATTERS
TOPIC
GUIDES

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MOTION:

**“THE UK SHOULD
LIBERALISE ITS
DRUGS POLICY”**

ABOUT DEBATING MATTERS

Debating Matters because ideas matter. This is the premise of the Institute of Ideas Debating Matters Competition for sixth form students which emphasises substance, not just style, and the importance of taking ideas seriously. Debating Matters presents schools with an innovative and engaging approach to debating, where the real-world debates and a challenging format, including panel judges who engage with the students, appeal to students from a wide range of backgrounds, including schools with a long tradition of debating and those with none.

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KEY TERMS

Decriminalise

Liberalise

INTRODUCTION

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In October 2014, a government commissioned report was published which suggested that tough, prohibitive laws on drugs did not result in lower instances of drug taking, reigniting the debate about drug policy in the UK [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. Over the past 10 years there has been growing dissatisfaction with current legislation and practices designed to curb the use of illegal drugs [Ref: [Guardian](#)], with American states and some European countries relaxing their drug policy, for instance, making marijuana available on prescription for medical use [Ref: [NCSL](#)]. Some who favour relaxed drug laws have hailed this alternative thinking as a potential victory for civil liberties, arguing that we should be able to choose which substances we consume without interference from the law [Ref: [Drug Policy Alliance](#)]. Opponents disagree, and suggest that the debate is a fundamentally moral one, a question of societal values, with columnist Kathy Gyngell arguing that any liberalisation will normalize drug taking: “It is not a battle about basic freedoms – far from it. Drugs enslave” [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. With this in mind, should drugs remain illegal, and would liberalising drugs policy in the UK send out the wrong message to the young, and encourage people to try drugs without fear of prosecution? Or is a more liberal approach to drug laws the way forward?



THE DRUGS POLICY DEBATE IN CONTEXT

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What are the social costs of drugs?

Since the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 drugs policy in the UK has been continually debated [Ref: [Wikipedia](#)]. According to the United Nations, in 2012, only 5 per cent of the global population took recreational drugs and only 0.6 per cent were addicts [Ref: [UNODC](#)], so why change the law for the benefit of such a small cohort of people some ask [Ref: [Prospect](#)]? The effect of a more liberal drugs policy in the UK would be profoundly negative on society critics argue, as: “There needs to be a proper stigma about drugs to stop people experimenting with them”, and because it would send the message to young people that drugs are OK [Ref: [Daily Mail](#)]. Drug misuse is the cause of around 2,000 deaths a year in the UK, and some half a million worldwide [Ref: [Telegraph](#)]. About 330,000 people in England are dependent on heroin and/or crack cocaine and many pay for their drugs through crime, in an estimated cost to the taxpayer of £13.9billion a year [Ref: [Telegraph](#)]. Drawing upon the relationship between morality and drugs, critic of revising legalisation Theodore Dalrymple, claims that any liberalisation of drug policy would have far reaching and undoubtedly negative effects on society. He argues that: “We lose remarkably little by not being permitted to take drugs” and rejects the notion that society would be any better by giving people the freedom to do so, because: “...when such a narrowly conceived freedom is made the touchstone of public policy, a dissolution of society is bound to follow” [Ref: [City Journal](#)]. For opponents, put simply: drugs are extremely harmful for individuals and society, which is why they should remain illegal [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. However, for advocates of reform such as Russell Brand, the social cost of current policies puts the lives of drug users and addicts at

risk because: “If drugs are illegal, people who use drugs are criminals”, resulting in vulnerable people being imprisoned, meaning that ultimately they fail to get the help that they need. Furthermore, all prohibition achieves is: “...an unregulated, criminal controlled, sprawling global mob economy” [Ref: [Guardian](#)] which, he argues, has catastrophic effects on both drug users and society more broadly. From this perspective reform is vital, so that drug use is treated as a health rather than criminal matter - a view Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg shares [Ref: [Independent](#)]. Some legalisation advocates such as Sam Bowman are also unmoved by arguments about the harm drugs do, and he argues that if it is really about harm to health and society then why not ban smoking and alcohol, both of which have acknowledged negative effects [Ref: [Conservative Home](#)]?

Drug policy around the world

Supporters of drug reform take policy around the world as an example of what the UK should be doing. For instance, Uruguay [Ref: [CNN](#)], as well as the American states of Colorado [Ref: [Huffington Post](#)] and Washington [Ref: [Fox News](#)] have recently legalised the possession and use of marijuana. As a result, Colorado raised over \$2m in taxes on recreational marijuana in its first month of legalisation, which increases to \$3.5m if you include sales for medical purposes [Ref: [Home Office](#)]. The first \$40m is being used to build new schools, while further public health projects, youth prevention programmes and substance abuse treatments are planned. Current estimates from the state governor’s office put potential annual tax revenues at more than \$100m [Ref: [Prospect](#)]. Pro-reform campaigners also evidence Portugal, which abolished all criminal penalties for personal



THE DRUGS POLICY DEBATE IN CONTEXT CONTINUED...

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possession of drugs in 2001 as an example of decriminalising working [Ref: [New York Times](#)]. Figures show that between 2002-2006 the use of hitherto illegal drugs by teenagers had declined, the rate of HIV infection among drug users had halved, and whilst the chances of those between the ages of 15-64 using drugs in their lifetime actually rose from 7.8% to 12% between 2001 and 2007, this figure has since fallen to pre 2001 levels [Ref: [EMCDDA](#)]. But others are less convinced by the positive effects of decriminalisation. One commentator argues that in Colorado, regular high school drug use has leapt from 19% to 30% since the State legalised medical marijuana in 2009 for adults - as well as teens using higher potency products, concluding that: "Students don't seem to realise that there is anything wrong with having the pot ... they act like having marijuana was an ordinary thing and no big deal" [Ref: [UCDenver.edu](#)]. Opponents also cite a pilot scheme in the London Borough of Lambeth between 2001-2002, in which cannabis was decriminalised, resulting in hospital admissions due to hard drugs use more than doubling in the area [Ref: [Telegraph](#)]. The morality of the state taxing drugs and controlling supply, as is the case in Uruguay, is also questioned in some quarters - how, these critics say, can we permit governments to gather taxes from drugs which cause human misery, and business to amass profits from substances which can induce mental illness [Ref: [Prospect](#)]?

Has the War on drugs failed?

First coined by President Richard Nixon in 1971, the so called 'war on drugs' is seen by many as unwinnable. Philosopher Raymond Tallis suggests that: "The harm caused by illegal drugs...is largely as consequence of their illegality" [Ref: [The](#)

[Times](#)], noting that criminalising drugs has had catastrophic effects: causing the price to skyrocket, the prison population to rise, and the residents of drug producing countries becoming the victims of cartel violence – citing Mexico, whose American supported drug crackdown since 2006 has resulted in over 60,000 deaths [Ref: [The Times](#)]. In this respect, campaigners claim that decriminalisation would remove the financial incentive for criminal gangs to sell drugs, but critics disagree. Instead, they argue that drug laws should be enforced more stringently in the UK, because the aim has to be preventing people from taking drugs in the first place. Peter Hitchens insists that drug taking is a moral issue, and that imprisoning users for breaking the law: "...may well be tragic for them, but their examples will... save many others from much worse fates" [Ref: [Daily Mail](#)]. It is the lack of effective deterrents for drug users which is to blame for organised crime and violence – not the war on drugs as some suggest, and Hitchens concludes by stating that: "If people were scared away from these drugs, by effective prosecution of possession, the trade would die" [Ref: [Daily Mail](#)]. Moreover, as one commentator puts it: "Saying the war against drugs is unwinnable, is like saying the war against burglary is unwinnable, and we should open our doors. Absurd" [Ref: [Telegraph](#)]. So, should drugs remain illegal in the UK for the good of society? Would giving up the war on drugs be a dangerous step in the wrong direction and send a worrying moral message, or should we admit that prohibition has failed and explore alternative options? Should the UK liberalise its drug policy?



ESSENTIAL READING

Misuse of Drugs Act 1971

Wikipedia

World Drug Report 2014

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime *United Nations*
June 2014

FOR

Shhhh....a lot of top people believe in drug reform

Hugo Rifkind *The Times* 4 November 2014

Ministers high on their war on drugs need a speedy cure

Simon Jenkins *Guardian* 1 November 2014

Illegal drugs should be legalised

Sam Bowman *Conservative Home* 22 February 2014

Drugs kill. Truth and reason are the victims

Professor Raymond Tallis *The Times* 11 December 2012

AGAINST

No quick fix

The Times 31 October 2014

Legalising drugs would bring not freedom but enslavement

Kathy Gyngell *Guardian* 20 February 2014

If cannabis is legal, more teenagers will smoke it – and that can't be good

John Rentoul *Independent* 7 January 2014

Why we shouldn't legalise drugs

Alexander Linklater *Prospect Magazine* 1 November 2010

IN DEPTH

Drugs: breaking the cycle

House of Commons Home Affairs Select Committee Ninth Report
1 December 2014

Drugs: international comparators

Home Office 30 October 2014

The duel: Should the UK legalise drugs

Molly Meacher & Peter Hitchens *Prospect Magazine* 27 March
2014

ORGANISATIONS

Drug Policy Alliance

European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction

Release

The Beckley Foundation

Transform

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BACKGROUNDEERS

Is the war on drugs making things worse?

Peter Hitchens & Johan Hari *Daily Mail* 3 January 2015

State medical marijuana laws

National Council of State Legislators 13 November 2014

Politicians can't afford to look tough anymore, we must embrace drug reform

Julian Huppert *Independent* 9 November 2014

The legalisation of marijuana isn't just about liberal values – it's about dollars

David McCandless *Guardian* 7 November 2014

What happens if you decriminalise drugs?

Tom Chivers *Telegraph* 31 October 2014

Martha Fernback's tragic experience shows the need for drug reform

Caroline Lucas *Guardian* 30 October 2014

We should go to war on drugs not addicts

Nick Clegg *Independent* 30 October 2014

Why I Changed Careers to Legalize a Drug I Don't Use

Amos Irwin *Huffington Post* 9 September 2014

What Science Says About Marijuana

Phillip F Boffey *New York Times* 30 July 2014

The drugs (policies) don't work

Alice Moran *YouGov* 16 June 2014

Decriminalising all drugs

Joao Castro-Branco Goulao *New York Times* 17 March 2014

Phillip Seymour Hoffman is another victim of extremely silly drug laws

Russell Brand *Guardian* 6 February 2014

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Colorado's drug pilot scheme could raise millions in tax dollars

Tim Walker *Independent* 1 January 2014

60% back royal commission on drugs

Harris MacLeod *YouGov* 14 December 2013

After legalizing marijuana, Washington and Colorado are starting to regulate it

Niraj Chokshi *Washington Post* 9 October 2013

World drug report 2013

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime May 2013

Get tough on drugs, don't legalise them

Simon Heffer *Telegraph* 17 December 2012

Heroic Uruguay deserves a Nobel peace prize for legalising cannabis

Simon Jenkins *Guardian* 12 December 2012

High Society

Peter Hitchens *Spectator* 13 October 2012

Drug legalisation? We need it like a hole in the head

Melanie Phillips *Melanie Phillips.com* 17 November 2011

Britain should not make the same mistakes a Portugal

Manuel Pinto Cuelho *World Federation Against Drugs* 3 October 2010

Legalising drugs would only make matters worse

Ian Oliver *Independent* 19 August 2008

Dont legalise drugs

Theodore Dalrymple *City Journal* 1997

Q&A with Christian Thurstone

University of Colorado



IN THE NEWS

Smoking cannabis every day 'shrinks brain but increases its connectivity'

Guardian 10 November 2014

Nick Clegg and Juan Manuel Santos to lead global initiative on drugs reform

Observer 8 November 2014

Six Britons arrested over Silk Road 2.0 amid dark-web takedown

Guardian 7 November 2014

Two states vote today on legalizing marijuana. Prepare for the 'Green Rush'

Guardian 4 November 2014

Cameron: Drug policy is working

Daily Mail 31 October 2014

Legal highs sending wrong message, Cameron insists

The Times 31 October 2014

Drugs laws don't work, ministers admit

The Times 30 October 2014

Brits think the war on drugs can never be won

The Sun 30 October 2014

Drug laws are failing, Home Office study shows

Guardian 30 October 2014

Pope Frances says he opposes making recreational drugs legal

CNN 11 September 2014

Open for business: legal marijuana sales underway in Washington

Fox News 8 July 2014

Uruguay creates a legal marijuana market

CNN 7 May 2014

Mother thought to be first woman in Britain to die from cannabis poisoning

Telegraph 30 January 2014

Uruguay marijuana move 'illegal' – UN drugs watchdog

BBC News 11 December 2013

Colorado first American city to legalise recreational marijuana

Huffington Post 10 September 2013

Cannabis scheme led to increase in hospital admissions

Telegraph 5 April 2013

Legalisation of drugs could save UK £14bn, says study

Guardian 7 April 2009

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NOTES



ADVICE FOR DEBATING MATTERS



FOR STUDENTS

READ EVERYTHING

In the Topic Guide and in the news - not just your side of the argument either.

STATISTICS ARE GOOD BUT.....

Your opponents will have their own too. They'll support your points but they aren't a substitute for them.

BE BOLD

Get straight to the point but don't rush into things: make sure you aren't falling back on earlier assertions because interpreting a debate too narrowly might show a lack of understanding or confidence.

DON'T BACK DOWN

Try to take your case to its logical conclusion before trying to seem 'balanced' - your ability to challenge fundamental principles will be rewarded - even if you personally disagree with your arguments.

DON'T PANIC

Never assume you've lost because every question is an opportunity to explain what you know. Don't try to answer every question but don't avoid the tough ones either.

FOR TEACHERS

Hoping to start a debating club? Looking for ways to give your debaters more experience? Debating Matters have a wide range of resources to help develop a culture of debate in your school and many more Topic Guides like this one to bring out the best in your students. For these and details of how to enter a team for the Debating Matters Competition visit our website, www.debatingmatters.com

FOR JUDGES

Judges are asked to consider whether students have been brave enough to address the difficult questions asked of them. Clever semantics might demonstrate an acrobatic mind but are also likely to hinder a serious discussion by changing the terms and parameters of the debate itself.

Whilst a team might demonstrate considerable knowledge and familiarity with the topic, evading difficult issues and failing to address the main substance of the debate misses the point of the competition. Judges are therefore encouraged to consider how far students have gone in defending their side of the motion, to what extent students have taken up the more challenging parts of the debate and how far the teams were able to respond to and challenge their opponents.

As one judge remarked *'These are not debates won simply by the rather technical rules of schools competitive debating. The challenge is to dig in to the real issues.'* This assessment seems to grasp the point and is worth bearing in mind when sitting on a judging panel.



**“A COMPLEX
WORLD REQUIRES
THE CAPACITY
TO MARSHALL
CHALLENGING IDEAS
AND ARGUMENTS”**

**LORD BOATENG, FORMER BRITISH HIGH
COMMISSIONER TO SOUTH AFRICA**