

UK should begin decriminalising drugs, say Richard Branson and Nick Clegg

Virgin founder and deputy prime minister argue that 'war on drugs' has failed and urge UK to follow Portuguese example

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Sir Richard Branson and Nick Clegg are urging the UK to begin decriminalising the use and possession of almost all drugs, following the example of Portugal.

The Virgin founder and deputy prime minister are to address a conference on fighting drug addiction on Wednesday, and in a Guardian article they argue that the "war on drugs" has failed.

"As an investment, the war on drugs has failed to deliver any returns," they write. "If it were a business, it would have been shut down a long time ago. This is not what success looks like.

"The idea of eradicating drugs from the world by waging a war on those who use them is fundamentally flawed for one simple reason: it doesn't reduce drug taking.

"The Home Office's own research, commissioned by Liberal Democrats in government and published a few months ago, found there is no apparent correlation between the 'toughness' of a country's approach and the prevalence of adult drug use.

"This devastating conclusion means that we are wasting our scarce resources, and on a grand scale."

Branson has always made a point of not endorsing party politics, but is willing to endorse specific campaigns, and as a member on the global commission on drugs policy has called for an international rethink on drugs laws.

In their article, they argue: "The status quo is a colossal con perpetrated on the public by politicians who are too scared to break the taboo."

Portugal decriminalised all drugs at the turn of the century. In the nearly 15 years since, the country has seen drug abuse drop by half, with the money previously spent on prohibition enforcement spent instead on reconnecting drug addicts with society.

In Clegg's clearest endorsement of the Portuguese experiment, they say: "We should look to Portugal which removed criminal penalties for drug possession in 2001.

"Portugal's reforms have not - as many predicted - led to an increase in drug use. Instead, they have allowed resources to be re-directed towards the treatment system, with dramatic reductions in addiction, HIV infections and drug-related deaths.

“Drugs remain illegal and socially unacceptable, as they should be, but drug users are dealt with through the civil rather than the criminal law.

“Anyone who is arrested for drug possession is immediately assessed and sent for treatment or education. If they fail to engage, they have to pay a fine.”

Portuguese citizens are allowed to purchase and possess 1g of heroin, 2g of cocaine, 25g of marijuana leaves or 5g of hashish.

They write: “The Portuguese system works, and on an issue as important as this, where lives are at stake, governments cannot afford to ignore the evidence. We should set up pilots to test and develop a British version of the Portuguese model.”

But the Centre for Social Justice, a charity closely associated with the work and pensions secretary, Iain Duncan Smith, claimed charities on the front line in the struggle against drug addiction are opposed to decriminalisation.

In recent CSJ research, nearly three-quarters of charities surveyed were concerned about the effect cannabis use had on their clients and families. More than half (56%) felt the decriminalisation of cannabis would lead to an increase in its use. Less than a quarter (23%) thought it would not.

Commenting on the findings, Christian Guy, director of the CSJ, said: “Drug addiction is ripping Britain’s poorest communities apart. Our network of 300 front-line charities sees this on a daily basis.

“Many are right to be worried that liberalising cannabis laws will lead to more people taking drugs and developing harder use.

“Politicians need to listen to these experts. They are the people who witness the devastating impact of drugs in our poorest neighbourhoods day in, day out.”

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