

Drugs and Double Standards

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The recent [exchange between Alex Wodak and Miranda Devine](#) in the Sydney Morning Herald (Ms. Miranda Devine, Puff goes the drug liberalizer, Sydney Morning Herald, 15 May 2008) also reported by [Crikey](#) illustrates the double standards often used in evaluations of harms caused by alcohol and illicit drugs.

Alex Wodak is strong critic of the liberal alcohol policies that Australia has adopted over the past few decades. Deregulation has seen increased access by young people to cheap alcohol sold in a larger number of licensed pubs and clubs. He advocates higher taxes on alcohol and reducing its availability as ways of reducing use and harm, as do most leading experts in alcohol policy.

When it comes to cannabis, however, Alex Wodak grudgingly admits that it can harm users. He focuses instead on the social ills created by the large black market that has arisen to meet existing demand for cannabis: organised crime, corruption and increasingly potent cannabis that is readily accessible to young people. His remedy for these problems is a legal cannabis market that would undermine the black market by providing regulated cannabis to adult users. He claims that this can be done without increasing cannabis use, with the evidence offered for the latter a study comparing patterns of cannabis use in regular users in San Francisco and Amsterdam.

Miranda Devine rightly took Alex Wodak to task for these views and the evidence he offered for them. She then used the much same type of argument – a comparison of rates of cannabis use in Sweden and Australia - to argue that Australia should adopt Sweden's policy towards cannabis and launch a war on cannabis that would involve enforcing the existing criminal penalties for use. She notes correctly that rates of cannabis use have fallen in Australia over the past decade or so, despite (in her view) our failure to enforce laws against cannabis. And the decrease has been much the same in states that have and have not removed criminal penalties for cannabis use.

If Alex Wodak has a blind spot about the harms of cannabis use then Miranda Devine has one on the harms of alcohol. She claims that anyone who is favours tighter alcohol policies is a closet drug liberaliser (presumably like Alex Wodak). She ignores the possibility that one can support policies that aim to increase the cost and reduce the availability and use of both drugs. Indeed, this is exactly what Swedish drug policy aims to do.

She also ignores compelling evidence that Australia needs to take alcohol more seriously. Alcohol is very cheap. It is sold in pre-mixed drinks that are very easy for young people to drink quickly in large amounts. Its use is heavily promoted by the alcohol industry and it is very freely available to young people under the legal drinking age. Household surveys show that alcohol is abused monthly or more often by around two fifths of men and a third of women aged 20 to 29 years. Alcohol use also causes about as many deaths, and as much disability, in young adults as heroin, cocaine, amphetamines and cannabis combined.

Drinkers and illicit drug users do not live in separate worlds. Pubs and clubs are venues for drinking to intoxication and points of sale for illicit drugs. Many, if not most, illicit drugs users are also regular, often heavy, consumers of alcohol.

We need less polarised debates about policies towards both legal and illegal drugs, preferably involving more than the usual suspects like Alex Wodak and Miranda Devine. Evidence on drug-related harm and the effectiveness of different policies towards legal and illegal drugs should be evaluated in a consistent way in these debates. And people of good will should be able to discuss these issues without some journalists campaigning to silence the expression of views with which they disagree.

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