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***“Legalise and regulate drugs”
says UK’s former drugs and defence Minister***

Bob Ainsworth MP, former Home Office drugs minister and Secretary of State for Defence, will call for the legalisation and regulation of drugs during a Parliamentary debate he is leading in Westminster Hall, at 2.30pm, Thurs 16th December 2010.

Mr Ainsworth said; “I have just been reading the Coalition Government’s new Drugs Strategy. It is described by the Home Secretary as fundamentally different to what has gone before; it is not. To the extent that it is different, it is potentially harmful because it retreats from the principle of harm reduction, which has been one of the main reasons for the reduction in acquisitive crime in recent years.

However, prohibition has failed to protect us. Leaving the drugs market in the hands of criminals causes huge and unnecessary harms to individuals, communities and entire countries, with the poor the hardest hit. We spend billions of pounds without preventing the wide availability of drugs. It is time to replace our failed war on drugs with a strict system of legal regulation, to make the world a safer, healthier place, especially for our children. We must take the trade away from organised criminals and hand it to the control of doctors and pharmacists.

As drugs minister in the Home Office I saw how prohibition fails to reduce the harm that drugs cause in the UK, fuelling burglaries, gifting the trade to gangsters and increasing HIV infections. My experience as Defence Secretary, with specific responsibilities in Afghanistan, showed to me that the war on drugs creates the very conditions that perpetuate the illegal trade, while undermining international development and security.

My departure from the front benches gives me the freedom to express my long held view that, whilst it was put in place with the best of intentions, the war on drugs has been nothing short of a disaster.

Politicians and the media need to engage in a genuine and grown up debate about alternatives to prohibition, so that we can build a consensus based on delivering the best outcomes for our children and communities. I call on those on all sides of the debate to support an independent, evidence-based review, exploring all policy options, including: further resourcing the war on drugs, decriminalising the possession of drugs, and legally regulating their production and supply.

One way to do this would be an Impact Assessment of the Misuse of Drugs Act in line with the 2002 Home Affairs Select Committee finding – which included David Cameron – for the government to explore alternatives to prohibition, including legal regulation.

The re-legalisation of alcohol in the US after thirteen years of Prohibition was not surrender. It was a pragmatic move based on the government's need to retake control of the illegal trade from violent gangsters. After 50 years of global drug prohibition it is time for governments throughout the world to repeat this shift with currently illegal drugs."

Peter Lilley MP, former Conservative Party Deputy Leader said;

"The current approach to drugs has been an expensive failure, and for the sake of everyone, and the young in particular, it is time for all politicians to stop using the issue as a political football. I have long advocated breaking the link between soft and hard drugs – by legalising cannabis while continuing to prohibit hard drugs. But I support Bob Ainsworth's sensible call for a proper, evidence based review, comparing the pros and cons of the current prohibitionist approach with all the alternatives, including wider decriminalisation, and legal regulation."

Tom Brake MP, Co-Chair, Liberal Democrat Backbench Committee on Home Affairs, Justice and Equalities said; *"Liberal Democrats have long called for a science-based approach to our drugs problem. So it is without hesitation that I support Bob Ainsworth's appeal to end party political point-scoring, and explore sensitively all the options, through an Impact Assessment of the Misuse of Drugs Act."*

Labour's Paul Flynn MP said; *"This could be a turning point in the failing UK 'war on drugs.' Bob Ainsworth is the persuasive, respected voice of the many whose views have been silenced by the demands of ministerial office. Every open rational debate concludes that the UK's harsh drugs prohibition has delivered the worst outcomes in Europe - deaths, drug crime and billions of pounds wasted."*

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Notes for Editors:

1. Bob Ainsworth MP has represented Coventry North since 1992 and has held a number of shadow and ministerial positions including:

- Home Office - Parliamentary secretary, with responsibility for drugs (Jun 2001 - Jun 2003)
- Deputy Chief Whip (June 2003 – June 2007)
- Minister for the Armed Forces (June 2007 – May 2009)
- Secretary of State for Defence (June 2009 – May 2010)
- Shadow Secretary of State for Defence (May 2010 – October 2010)

<http://bobainsworthmp.wordpress.com/biography/> and
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/person/36/bob-ainsworth>

2. For more information on calls for an Impact Assessment of our approach to drugs see:
http://www.tdpf.org.uk/IDPC%20Briefing_Impact%20Assessment_June%202010.pdf

3. David Cameron on drug law reform: *Tory contender calls for more liberal drug laws*
<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/tory-contender-calls-for-more-liberal-drug-laws-505824.html>

As a member of the Home Affairs Select Committee inquiry into drug misuse in 2002 David Cameron voted in favour of recommendation 24: “We recommend that the Government initiates a discussion within the Commission on Narcotic Drugs of alternative ways—including the possibility of legalisation and regulation—to tackle the global drugs dilemma (paragraph 267).”
<http://www.parliament.the-stationery-office.co.uk/pa/cm200102/cmselect/cmhaff/318/31814.htm>

4. The Liberal Democrat party policy recognises “*The failure of prohibition*”, supports decriminalisation of drugs, and calls for an audit comparing the current approach with the alternatives. Lib Dem detailed policy paper and manifesto:
<http://www.tdpf.org.uk/lib%20dem%20drugs%20policy%20paper47>
http://www.libdems.org.uk/our_manifesto.aspx

5. There is a long history of those involved in developing or delivering drug policy supporting reform once out of office. See
http://tdpf.org.uk/MediaNews_Reform_supporters.htm

These include:

- Former drugs Minister Mo Mowlam: *Fight terror: legalise the drugs trade*
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2002/sep/19/drugsandalcohol.comment>
- Julian Critchley, former Director of the UK Anti-Drug Coordinating Unit:
All the experts admit that we should legalise drugs
<http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/julian-critchley-all-the-experts-admit-that-we-should-legalise-drugs-894367.html>

6. The difference between decriminalisation and legalisation:

Decriminalisation is the removal of criminal sanctions for the production, supply or use of an illegal drug. Civil or administrative sanctions, such as a requirement to enter treatment, may remain, even if criminal sanctions (resulting in prosecution and a criminal record) are removed. In popular usage, the term 'decriminalisation' usually refers to the removal of criminal sanctions for possession of drugs for personal use, while sanctions often remain for the production or supply of drugs.

Legalisation and regulation - ‘*legalisation*’ is a process - moving away from absolute prohibition - and does not specify what legal framework to regulate production, supply and use of drugs replaces it. ‘Legalisation and regulation’ is not the free for all some have envisaged, and is not a free market model as espoused by some libertarians, instead it involves controls on producers, products, vendors and consumers. For example models of strict legal regulation see “After the War on Drugs: Blueprint for Regulation”
<http://www.tdpf.org.uk/blueprint%20download.htm>