



Politics of Fear: Harper's War on Drugs

by Libby Davies

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The Conservative government has taken another big step in its ideological drive for a "tough on crime" law and order agenda.

This time it's Bill C-26, an Act to amend the Controlled Drug and Substances Act, "to provide minimum penalties for serious drug offences", introduced in the House of Commons November 21. It will make George W. Bush very happy. He will know that at least Stephen Harper is following his lead. The Bill has all the dirty hallmarks of the so called "war on drugs" that has been raging in the United States for close to 40 years, successfully destroying millions of lives and communities, as the federal prison population swells to 2.1 million people, over half of whom are there for drug offences.

As in the U.S., the rhetoric and spin on this Bill are the same, playing on fears of drug pushers, especially regarding youth, as the Bill promises to get tough on traffickers and dealers, and to protect our children in and around school premises. The Bill will bring in Minimum Mandatory Sentences (MMs), including for marijuana, and claims to target almost exclusively organized crime and big time traffickers.

The only problem is, as history and reality shows us, this heavy handed reliance on law enforcement is not only a failure; it is a *colossal* failure, economically, socially, and culturally. Law enforcement regarding drugs typically targets low level dealers and users, and ironically re-enforces the monopoly of organized crime and the drug kingpins, who either escape enforcement or are in the best position to negotiate deals.

In 1994, 28% of Canadians reported they had used illicit drugs. By 2004 the percentage had risen to 45. Clearly enforcement has had little or no impact; quite the contrary, in fact, as drug use has increased.

Canada spends 73% of its drug policy budget on enforcement, compared to treatment (14%), research (7%), prevention (2.6%), and harm reduction (2.6%).

Like the U.S., the Conservative government is hell bent on the dogma of MMs, even though all the evidence shows they are not a deterrent for drug crimes. A 2002 Justice Department report concluded that MMs are least effective in relation to drug offences. And in the U.S., where MMs gained enormous prominence when they were introduced in the mid 1980s, the American Bar Association, the U.S. Sentencing Commission, and the States of Michigan, California, Delaware, and Massachusetts, have all either repealed or are calling for the repeal of MMs.

To make matters worse, the Conservative government has reached out and extended its illogical dogma to successful harm reduction programs, like [InSite](#) in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. The only safe injection site in North America, *InSite* has saved many lives, and proven itself over and over to be a key component in helping people who are in desperate circumstances. Ignoring results based evidence and over 25 scientific studies, the Conservatives refuse to recognize the importance of *InSite* and other Harm Reduction programs that have quietly and effectively operated with minimal funds and support. The 2007 Conservative budget made it pretty clear - harm reduction won't get their support, and they will go to any lengths to cut it out. In their recently announced anti-drug strategy, it becomes clearer still that enforcement is the primary focus.

So why this concerted and radical effort by the Conservative government to ignore clear evidence about what works and what doesn't when it comes to drug policy? Why are they so willing to spend obscene amounts of money on a completely failed strategy, knowing that it won't deter drug use, and in fact with MMs will completely overwhelm the justice system and provincial prisons, and exacerbate already harmful and dangerous rates of HIV/AIDS in the prison population? Why are they so eager to follow a policy that so clearly and cruelly targets poor people and racial minorities (as has exactly been happening in the U.S.)?

The answer, I believe, is that they actually don't care about illicit drugs and the impact of almost 100 years of prohibition policies. They don't care about the massive costs both human and fiscal, and they don't really care that the war on drugs is a war on poor people who become more and more criminalized and penalized and robbed of their future. Nor do they care about developing safe and healthy communities free of the impacts of a drug war now out of control.

What they *do* care about, and what they are intent on doing, is exploiting the real fears people have about crime, drugs, and safety for political gain and advantage. It is eminently easier for this government to put drug dealers in jail than to implement a national housing strategy.

It's called the politics of fear. And it's very powerful and plays to the Conservative base and, they hope, to the moderate middle class. It scapegoats people who are poor and marginal, and creates exactly the kind of divide they want - they, the Conservatives, are tough on bad people and crime, and anyone who doesn't agree with them is soft and pro-crime. It's a simple message, purely political and partisan in nature, and they see it as their ticket to power. The drug war, intricately bound to its companion, the war on terror, both global in nature, has worked and has carried the Bush political agenda. Stephen Harper sees his future wrapped the same way.

Still, there are some breaches in the game plan, as groups like [Law Enforce Against Prohibition \(LEAP\)](#) grow in stature. Made up of former and current law enforcement officials, LEAP challenges the war on drugs and dispels the myths and rot that has set in.

In Canada, there is a growing movement of NGOs and individuals to defeat Harper's war and expose it for what it is - insidious, hateful, ineffective, and a waste of money. Let's not forget Harper wanted to close *InSite*, period. But he couldn't, at least not for now, because of broad public support.

Still, Bill C-26 is a serious problem and there will be serious consequences for our Justice system and local communities if it is implemented.

I hope that won't happen.

It makes better sense to focus on sound public policy, understanding the harms of drug prohibition itself, and to direct public resources to the building blocks for healthy individuals and communities - good housing, good jobs, clean air, early childhood development, and education, to name a few of the essentials.

Let's finally accept that drug use, both what is deemed legal and illegal, has always existed, and that the best policy is to provide realistic and honest education about substances that can be harmful, and provide help where needed for addictions and misuse.

Let's focus on regulation as a model, not outright prohibition, which is no deterrence at all.

Let's embark on a common sense approach and accept the overwhelming evidence that the war on drugs has caused more death, pain, harm and crime than we can bear, and that it's time to stop it.

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