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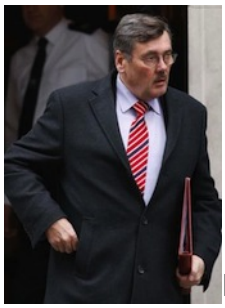
A missed opportunity [1]

Written by **Sam Bowman** [2] | Friday 17 December 2010

 It?s a pity politicians rarely discover their zeal for individual liberty while in power. Bob Ainsworth's call yesterday for the legalization of all drugs allows him to join the club of politicians whose conversions came after it stopped mattering. By waiting until the twilight of his career he's wasted his chance to do the right thing on drugs.

Ainsworth is right that drug prohibition is about as effective as alcohol prohibition was ? not at all ? and that the War on Drugs is exceptionally harmful to drug users and society in general. Many point to the damage caused to countries like Mexico and Guinea-Bissau by the War on Drugs, but even at home it makes the drug problem worse by an order of magnitude.

Counterintuitively, the worst thing about the War on Drugs is how much it drives up the cost of drugs. Many addicts live in poverty and commit crimes to pay for the expensive drugs they crave, but that expense is a direct consequence of the government?s prohibition laws. Fears that drug legalization would lead to people becoming addicted and be driven to crime to pay for their addictions ignore this.

Some might not like the thought of cheaper drugs, but if it means less crime then it's not really anybody else's business. And nearly everybody who has looked at this issue from a ?harm reduction? standpoint agrees that the prohibition laws are the worst possible option for drug users and society.

Furthermore, the Telegraph report linked to above says that drug-related crime costs the economy £13bn every year, and most crime lords make their money from drug trafficking. If you legalized drugs and prostitution, it?s hard to see how organized crime would make any money at all.

Bob Ainsworth?s intervention is welcome and might encourage other politicians to come out of the closet in their open-mindedness about drug legalization. But in waiting until his opinion is largely irrelevant and ? a cynic might suggest ? using this to grab some attention for himself as his profile wanes, he has thrown away a chance to be brave and effect real change. An anti-prohibition speech an ex-minister might be interesting, but from the minister responsible for crime prevention it might have been decisive. Still, better late than never.

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