



- Is there a drug problem in your country?
- Are people punished for drug use?

The Coffee Shop Situation

In 1976, Holland decided that the crime around selling drugs was a greater threat than the health problem caused to the drug user. So to separate marijuana from the underworld, they decriminalized it and cannabis became tolerated – but not technically legalized – by the government. Respectable coffee-shop owners cheered this approach and welcomed the stability and security of being legitimate, even if it meant paying more taxes.

The Parool, Amsterdam's leading newspaper, asked the mayor how much a gram of marijuana costs in his city. 'f15 a gram,' he answered. In other countries people would be surprised the mayor knows how much a bag of weed is, but in Holland, the man shaping an intelligent drug policy knows the facts.

Meanwhile, the rest of the world continues its unending 'war on drugs'. French President Jacques Chirac blamed

Holland for its drug troubles, even though, according to Time magazine, Holland has fewer addicts per thousand than France and supplies fewer drugs to France than Spain, Pakistan and Morocco.

This year it was the U.S. drug-czar Barry McCaffery who came to celebrate America's successful drug policy. Although one may have expected him to be curious about coffee shops here, he found no need to visit one because it was a 'bad photo opportunity'.

He went further, calling Holland's progressive drug policy 'an unmitigated disaster', citing higher crime in Holland as proof. Huh? I don't know what he smokes, but this country is safe, and there is no place in the western world with more violence than America. But I guess when you're fighting a 'war', the truth sometimes has to be suppressed.

So in a bow to foreign pressure, the government reduced the amount of soft drugs an individual can possess from 30 grams to five. But maybe Holland should go further. If they recriminalize drugs, maybe they can wipe them out altogether, just like France and America.

While we're at it, maybe France can give us some advice on how to end strikes and reduce unemployment, and the U.S. about stopping violence in schools.

No matter what happens in the long run, you can still go into any 'coffee shop', proudly march up to the bartender, and announce in a loud voice: 'I want to buy some hashish, and then I'm going to smoke it.' Most places will even have rolling papers and filter tips on the bar.

There are several types of hash and pot, which have been bred to produce different highs. Each coffee shop has its own name for its weed, even if it comes from the same place. Just don't let the big menu scare you. (Yes, they'll have a menu.)

Hash comes in two basic varieties: blond and black. The black hash hits a little harder and knocks you out a little more. Locals smoke the lighter stuff.

Any place that calls itself a 'coffee shop' is saying three things: 1) I have pot and hash for you to buy. 2) For the price of a coffee or beer, you may sit here and smoke your own as well. 3) You may also smoke on my outdoor terrace, even in front of the police.



Teenager smoking marijuana

Boom!

???

COMPREHENSION

- 1 What happened in 1976?
- 2 Why does the mayor know how much a gram of marijuana costs?
- 3 Explain what is meant by a 'bad photo opportunity'.
- 4 The writer uses a lot of irony in his piece. Find an example, and explain why it's ironic.
- 5 What facilities do the coffee shops have for the marijuana user?



DISCUSSION

- 1 The author seems to think a relaxed approach to the drugs problem is best – do you agree with him? Why, why not?
- 2 Do you think drugs are more acceptable now than a generation ago?
- 3 Why do you think people are drawn to taking drugs?
- 4 Do you think there's a relationship between drug use and crime? Give details.
- 5 In terms of the law, should a difference be made between those who use so-called soft drugs, such as marijuana, and those who use hard drugs like cocaine and heroin? Why, why not?
- 6 Do you think use of soft drugs inevitably leads to use of heroin and cocaine? Why, why not?
- 7 Do you think there should be any difference made between those who use drugs and those who sell drugs, and what would be a suitable punishment in each case?
- 8 Which policy do you agree with most – zero tolerance, as is the case in America, or the more relaxed attitude in Holland? Why?
- 9 Do you think drugs can ever be completely wiped out? Why, why not?



ACTIVITIES

A Role-play. In groups of four or five. Your country has recently seen a big increase in drug use amongst the young. The government – after looking at the different approaches of Holland and New York – has called on your committee to produce a range of ideas to lead the fight against the drugs menace. Together, you need to think about:

- New laws, whether to penalise drug use/the drug trade OR to legalise certain aspects of it (give details about these laws)
- How best to educate the public against the dangers posed by drugs
- Any other measures you think might be effective in the war against drugs

B ✎ Write up your ideas on fighting drugs as a report for the government. Outline the problem, what measures you think are needed to combat it and why.

Or

✎ Write a letter to the magazine that published the article. Give your opinion of what's happening in Holland, and in any other country that you know. State what you think are the best solutions to the drug problem, and why.



AMMUNITION BOX

Key words

zero tolerance *the policy of punishing someone, even for a minor offence*

decriminalise *to make something legal*

to eradicate *to get rid of something*

recreational use *using drugs occasionally, to relax, not an addict*

addicted to *when you cannot give something up*

intravenous *injecting drugs into a vein*

to educate *to inform*

Handy hints

- Penalties for carrying marijuana in America

Quantity	First offence	Second offence
Less than 50 kg	not more than five years	not more than 10 years
50-99 kg	not less than 20 years	not more than 30 years
100-999 kg	not less than five years	not less than 10 years
1,000 kg or more	not less than 10 years	not less than 20 years
- Cost to society*
 - People in prison due to drug-related crime: 20.4% of the prison population
 - Costs from premature deaths: 14.9% of the general population
 - Lost productivity due to drug-related illness: 14.5% of the general population
- Between 1988 and 1995, Americans spent \$57.3 billion on drugs
 - \$38 billion on cocaine
 - \$9.6 billion on heroin
 - \$7 billion on marijuana
 - \$2.7 billion on other illegal drugs

*Source: National Institute of Drug Abuse



NETWORKING

Find out more about drug use in your country.

How widespread is it, and how are people who use drugs punished?

Books: *Bright Lights, Big City* by Jay McInerney
Mr Nice by Howard Marks
Trainspotting by Irvine Welsh

Film: *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1998) directed by Terry Gilliam
Trainspotting (1996) by Danny Boyle

Websites:

www.ecad.net/
www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/drugs.htm