
BRITISH GROUP INTER-PARLIAMENTARY UNION

DRUG POLICY REFORM PARLIAMENTARY SEMINAR

PLENARY SESSION VII: THE ROLE OF DRUGS IN CREATING VIOLENCE

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GUILHERME MUSSI**

The Role of Drugs in Creating Violence

[RT HON THE LORD DHOLAKIA OBE DL *in the Chair*]

The Chair said that the session would allow delegates to consider case studies from different regions, and to discuss drug production, trafficking, abuse and the resulting cycle of violence. Everyone knew that alcohol related to violence, and drugs related to crime, and that that general pattern could be found in many countries. Delegates would discuss the type of violence often found in the family, such as youngsters stealing from within the family, and violence in the community, in the form of stealing to feed a drug habit. One of the tragic aspects of violence in London was drug-related knifings among the young people holding the pitches from which drugs were sold, and or among those who failed to pay their dues when buying drugs. He said that he wanted delegates to leave the session with some clear ideas of where to go from there; there should be a clear policy statement from many of the countries that were represented. They should find out how countries' policies on drug-related violence were publicised, and what sort of training was available to people tackling such issues—the police, social services, teachers and others. They should examine the effectiveness of countries' policies to tackle violence. When a situation was monitored, it was always the end product of something that had happened; it would give an indication of where to move, but the most important part was recognising that there was a problem.

He said that as the session started slightly late, each speaker had no more than five minutes. He was told that he was a very nasty Chairman, but he did not mind, because he wanted to ensure that delegates could contribute and say how their countries did things, so that they could see how to move forward.

Mexico

Speaker: Iris Vianey Mendoza, Senator, Mexico.

Iris Vianey Mendoza said that five minutes was a short time in which to talk about the situation in her country. She would describe drug-related violence in Mexico in broad brushstrokes. Consumption of marijuana in Mexico was 2% lower than in the United States and Canada, where it was between 8% and 11%. Marijuana in itself was not Mexico's problem, because it did not cause chaos or violence and did not create problems between cartels. It was a drug that did not generate any conflict in Mexico.

She said that the health system in Mexico dealt directly with drug addicts who were addicted to certain substances. They had rehabilitation residences and health centres where drug addicts were treated in the same way as cancer patients. Coverage was not complete, as these things were not compulsory. Mexico suffered from violence because it was a transit country. No country had a monopoly over the production of drugs. The situation in Mexico was dreadful; for six years, it had been fighting a war against drugs that had generated a lot of violence and crime. There were 2 million displaced people who were homeless and jobless.

She said that the Mexican Government had certain policies that she did not completely agree with, but her party did not necessarily agree with the decriminalisation of marijuana. Neither the Government nor the Opposition did. If marijuana were legalised, it would increase consumption, and the drug would be more available to children. Young people used it as a starter drug, and it led to the consumption of harder drugs. Worldwide, marijuana was taken up at an early age.

She said that Mexico was seeing an increase in amphetamines, and that certain synthetic drugs were transiting through Mexico. The cartels fought for control over not just legal drugs but illegal drugs, and the illegal market wanted to get legal access to distribute and sell marijuana. She wanted to speak about public health, because a cabinet survey released two weeks ago showed that the majority of the Mexican public thought that decriminalising marijuana would act against public health, and would mean that the Government were not fulfilling their obligation to protect Mexicans' health.

She said that her party, which was left wing, believed in human rights and that people were entitled to freedom, but it did not want to jeopardise the health of any Mexicans or the Mexican state. The benefits from taxing marijuana would be minimal. In countries where consumption of marijuana was high, there would be no cost-benefit to the state from taxing marijuana if, under legislation, sale was purely for medicinal purposes. The state would not collect that much tax, and the consequence of legalising marijuana would be harmful.

She said that Mexican society was not in favour of decriminalising marijuana. Parliamentarians were trying to combat crime, and work internationally to reduce drug-related violence, through three important actions. Recently they had legislated to improve their police service because they had a problem with corruption. Guatemalan colleagues mentioned El Chapo Guzmán; he could not move freely in Mexico. He escaped from the country. Mexico was trying to restructure its police services, so that it did not have any corruption.

Sierra Leone

Speaker: **Hon. Chernor Maju Bah**, Member and Deputy Speaker, Sierra Leone Parliament.

Chernor Maju Bah said that though he was present in his capacity as a representative of the ECOWAS Parliament, he was also a Member of the Sierra Leone Parliament, and most of what he said would relate to his country and the sub-region. A distinction had to be drawn between conflicts and violence, and the topic under discussion was violence. Conflict was a broader concept. It was difficult for any society to say that drugs did not breed violence, and Sierra Leone was no exception.

He said that the most common drug in West Africa was marijuana, with occasional isolated instances of crack and cocaine use, and that there was not a strong connection between HIV and drugs in the sub-region. Much effort had been made in the sub-region to ensure that the issue of drugs was tackled. The countries were transit, rather than producer or consumer, countries. Religion had a large influence in society. He was therefore grateful for the debate, because discussing the decriminalisation of drugs would be hard for his sub-region, as the taking of drugs was considered taboo on both moral and religious grounds.

He said that a colleague from Uruguay had stated that figures relating to proposals in that country had gone from 5% to 10%, and then to 26% and that it would take some time before a maximum was reached. The ECOWAS region was making a lot of effort on the issue, because it wanted to prevent the problem; that was why drug issues were at the forefront of states' and religious societies' attention

He said that violence was caused by drug use. People lost their senses when they took drugs, and so did negative things that often led to violence. Sierra Leoneans were no exception. It was no secret that during the war in Sierra Leone between 1991 and 2002, drugs were used to perpetrate violence through the use of child soldiers. Most of the children, both boys and girls, had found it difficult to participate, but as soon as they were given drugs, they became more volatile and dangerous than the adults. Sierra Leone was not at the stage where

drug use was as high as in other areas. Its parliamentarians wanted to make sure that they used all the opportunities available to them and kept their eye on the ball.

He said that the sub-region had an intergovernmental action group against money laundering in West Africa, and that drugs and terrorism played a large role in money laundering. West African countries were coming up with individual national policies and strategies, but the sub-region's Heads of State, Ministers and their counsels were acting collectively on drug issues, particularly as the sub-region had been used for transit. Considering levels of political stability and poverty, they were making a considerable effort. They were talking about drugs used for healing, and whether they were medical or non-medical, legal or illegal. He concluded by saying that violence mostly came from the use of drugs.

Malta

Speaker: Hon. Robert Cutajar, Member of Parliament, Malta.

Robert Cutajar said that a lot of research had been done on the relationship between drugs and violence. He would point to a few salient points from that research and recommend how delegates might consider working to address the challenges.

The phenomenon of drug-related violence started to emerge predominantly in the United States in the late 1970s, largely in relation to the abuse and distribution of crack cocaine. During the 1980s, there was a rise in random or impersonal homicides. That remained the most important aspect of the drug-violence relationship on a structural level, which extended into ancillary areas such as money laundering. There were several other aspects of violence related to substance abuse. In a small country like Malta, incidents of drug-related violence of the structural type were few and far between. However, other aspects of violence related to drugs were much more widespread in society in Malta, and he would focus on them.

He said that drugs were related to violence in four main ways: first, the pharmacological effect of drugs could induce violent behaviour. Secondly, violence was common in the drug distribution system. Thirdly, the high cost of drugs often impelled users to commit violent crime to support their drug use. Fourthly, drug abuse could lead to interpersonal violence. Substance abuse could be a symptom of other social factors, such as a history of abuse in childhood, crime in the community, and financial and developmental disadvantage, which could cause stress for families if they could not cope with the demands of everyday life, so culture could create an a priori disposition to violence. The social factors that led to disadvantage also increased a person's disposition to abuse drugs. The combination of social disadvantage and substance abuse could create the perfect environment for violence.

He said that different substances had different effects on violence. The link between heroin and violence was virtually non-existent, but evidence showed that sustained periods of using high doses of amphetamines could lead to toxic psychosis, which could lead to violent episodes. Evidence linked the use of cocaine to violent episodes, and suggested that cocaine-associated violence might be a defensive reaction to an irrational fear. A recent cold-blooded double murder, which spared a third person, was a result of toxic psychosis caused by sustained cocaine abuse. It was eventually explained that it was carried out as a result of an irrational fear.

He said that research showed that the purity of a drug can affect the drug-violence association, but that it was still impossible to say with certainty what the links between violence and drugs were, because research was based on only a few individuals. However, it

had shown that intoxication had a significant impact on cognitive ability and functioning. The nature of the impact varied according to the substance, but it was moderated by the context in which the behaviour took place.

He said that violence related to substance abuse was predominantly caused by alcohol abuse. Research suggested that the link between violence and alcohol was stronger than the link between violence and drugs, for pharmacological and social reasons. Alcohol, rather than drugs, was overwhelmingly involved when crimes were committed. Research showed that 86% of homicide offenders, 36% of assault offenders, 60% of sexual offenders, 57% of men and 27% of women involved in domestic violence, and 13% of child abusers were drinking at the time of their offence.

He concluded with some recommendations. Societies would be better equipped to deal with the effects of substance abuse if they developed drug policies that recognised that violence and substance abuse were grounded in the social context. Drug policy needed to distinguish between different types of drugs and the impact that they had on individuals, and between illicit and legal substances and the extent to which they were available. The judicial system needed better to understand the relationship between substance abuse, the social environment and violence. That would improve society's understanding of the problem, and help corrective action to reflect reality.

Brazil

Speaker: Guilherme Mussi, Member of Congress, Brazil.

Guilherme Mussi said that Brazil had two problems pertaining to drugs. First, it was a transit country. Cocaine from Bolivia and Colombia was sent through Brazil to Europe, Mexico and America. Secondly, it was a big consumer of drugs. Crack was a bigger problem than cocaine, because it was cheap and caused violence.

He said that he was speaking personally, not as a Congressman. There was a big difference between the way that the medical and criminal issues should be treated. He was to the right of the Brazilian Government, and thought that drugs should be treated more as a criminal than a medical problem. In Brazil, the drug problem was hidden under the umbrella of health.

He said that 16 and 17-year-olds behaved as though they had a licence to kill. They shot whomever they felt like shooting, including people's parents and daughters. If they were arrested, they spent only two or three years in prison playing football, and when they were released, 90% reoffended. The Government hid that information, and when those teenagers turned 18, they started afresh with a clean criminal record. Progress had been made in the public health system: people were now able to get medical care paid for by the Government. There was no such provision a few years ago, and it was a big improvement.

He said there had been recent high-profile cases of drug addicts committing serious crimes. In his opinion, the Minister for Human Rights in Brazil should be living with pigs, not among society, because she was nuts. Recently a man stole a motorcycle and was killed by a policeman; the Minister for Human Rights cried on TV after having seen the scene, because she said he was under the influence of crack and did not know what he was doing. The man who owned the motorcycle, who had two daughters, was chased and was nearly shot. He had a camera on his helmet, as many people did in Brazil, and he recorded the action; the recording can be seen on YouTube. Luckily, a policeman was on the other side of the street. He shot the thief four times. The Minister for Human Rights said that the thief did not know what he was doing, but he had followed the motorcycle for more than five minutes. Then he

jumped off his partner's motorcycle in an almost military move, made the man stop and stole his bike.

He said that some people should be treated as though they had a health problem, but he was worried about the Government in Brazil. The Minister for Justice's way of thinking was also a worry. He had banned many kinds of guns, which meant that whereas criminals used .50 calibre guns that could take down police choppers, civilians were not able to buy .22 calibre guns, which could not kill a mosquito. He worried about the Government's liberal position on drug-related crimes.

Questions from Delegates

Robert del Picchia (*France*) said that he agreed with what his Mexican and Brazilian friends said about violence. The problems in France were not exactly the same, but it had many problems, too. He was in favour of a health policy and prevention, but certain types of violence were not talked about much; an example was drivers' violence. Many accidents happened because people were under the influence of drugs. Those accidents were on the rise in France and were alarming. He was not talking about the notorious gang wars in Marseilles, in which gang leaders selling different kinds of drugs settled their accounts among themselves, and victims were normally gang members. He wanted to mention another kind of violence.

Some 4 million people, perhaps more, lived in disadvantaged areas around Paris. There were many second or third-generation immigrants, who tended to come from the other side of the Mediterranean. In those areas, there was a societal problem. Between 60% and 80% of the young people there were unemployed, and had no money. They lived in social housing, which tended to be in high-rise buildings. There was a drugs distribution hub for the whole of Paris. Many young people were attracted to working as dealers. Once the spiral started, it was difficult to break it or slow it down. That was a large-scale social problem that was linked to drugs.

Martha Palafox Gutiérrez (*Mexico*) said that the drugs problem was connected to immigration, family disintegration, domestic violence and unemployment. It was important to work on preventative policies, such as those on security and health, which went hand-in-hand with wider policies.

Maria Angelica Cristi (*Chile*) asked the Brazilian delegate to comment on what ex-judge Karam said regarding the human rights of drug traffickers. It was clear that the real violators of human rights were the people who promoted the consumption of drugs. As the Maltese delegate said, drugs harmed families, life, work, youth and children, and led to child abuse and domestic violence. That was the real violation of human rights; it was not just a question of the rights of people who felt encouraged to take drugs. As to whether drug users should be punished, that was a delicate issue. The victims on the receiving end of all the violence were not the consumers of drugs, nor the drug traffickers or dealers. Justice was becoming too concerned with the human rights of perpetrators. Many military personnel in Colombia who had to deal with drug-related violence were now being questioned on whether they had violated human rights. One had to ask who the victims and who the real violators of human rights were. It was important to clarify that.

The Chair said that the Chilean delegate raised an important question: who were the real victims in matters affecting human rights? It would be helpful to know what good practice was adopted in each country, and he would like to hear as many contributions as possible.

Robert Cutajar agreed with the Chilean delegate. He said that he believed that Government investment in education was the most important thing. Education was the key to success, even in drug-related issues. All Governments should invest in educating people in primary and secondary schools, as that would lead to a better future. If it was invested in today, the fruits would be reaped tomorrow.

Iris Vianey Mendoza said that Mexico was trying to teach primary school-age children about security. She agreed with the Chilean delegate: there was the violence that was produced by drugs, and the violence produced by institutions. The federal Government's way of conducting operations had to be changed and adapted to meet international standards. New legislation was needed, like that in Canada and other countries. Mexico did not have such legislation, which was why many operations were violent and caused more terror in society than the violence between the cartels. She wanted a Bill on the legitimate use of violence in Mexico to improve the situation.

Chernor Maju Bah said that the Chilean delegate's question on who violence was perpetrated against was important. Mr Mussi had talked about the effect of people taking drugs; the medical issue had to be distinguished from the legal one, because no two cases were the same, and one size would not fit all. Mr del Picchia had made it clear that though people in the drug trade might violate each other's human rights, that was separate and distinct from violations suffered by people who were not part of the trade. If someone took an intoxicating drug and perpetrated violence on someone who was not a player, that was serious. The issue of human rights was raised; whose human rights would we be talking about? He asked whether we would protect those causing problems and forget about those suffering from problems, or whether we would have to look at both sides.

The Chair said that Chernor Maju Bah had raised the important issue of child soldiers in Sierra Leone, and asked who perpetrated the policy of feeding them drugs to make them violent against enemies.

Chernor Maju Bah said that it was the rebel leaders. People buying drugs gave money to drug dealers, who used the money to buy blood diamonds, which people were selling to buy drugs, so it was a vicious cycle.

Erica Roxana Claire (Bolivia) said that delegates had stated that there was not a one-size-fits-all solution, because every culture was different and had its own problems. She did not like to admit it, but it was clear that there was a first world, a second world and a third world, although they all had something in common: they were all comprised of children and parents. Often people wanted the Government to resolve issues that started in the home. In Bolivia, policies started at home or at school, because the more connections there were between parents and children, or teachers and children, the more the issue could be controlled.

The Chair said that he dared not try to sum up such a variety of views. There was no simple formula that could be applied to all countries. That had been clearly identified at a critical stage. It was important to take into account that few countries were prepared to identify the issues or what measures needed to be taken. That was remarkable. In some countries, there was not even the opportunity to hold a seminar on drugs reform. He was therefore delighted that delegates had been able to gather and put forward their points of view.

He said that the key question was where we went next. It was crucial that parliamentarians were able to identify positive models and the outcomes of those models. Penalising possession had led to violence; decriminalisation could also lead to violence. There were examples of battles over legalisation of possession in some countries. The delegates had also discussed regulation of supply.

He said that parliamentarians must never forget the impact that policies have on the issues that panellists talked about. Panellists had spoken about the need to identify problems at a very early stage. He was flabbergasted by the fact that, in this country, he learned more about drugs from schoolchildren than their parents. There was a particular constituency of young people whose knowledge about drugs and drug taking was much greater than their parents' ability to cope. There was therefore a need to think about the role of teachers, parents and others.

He said that the panellist from Mexico mentioned the role of the police, not only in controlling crime, but with regard to violence. There was a need to take the debate forward by looking at positive examples from other countries and seeing how applicable they were. Parliamentarians carried a heavy responsibility. He hoped that when delegates returned to their country, they would bring the issues to the attention of their Parliaments.

He said that all big things started with a small step. When the delegates met again to discuss these issues, they may find that they have made significant progress on problems that people tended to hide away from, deny or deal with by locking people up. Locking people up was not a solution and never would be. It was important to take the debate forward. He thanked the delegates and panellists for their contributions.