

PRESS RELEASE

Victoria Silver (**UKDPC**) 020 7821 3792 or 07866 757 389

Beatrice Karol Burks (**Demos**) 020 7367 6325 or 07929 474 938

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Time to rethink our drug control laws

'It's time to rethink our drug control laws' – This week (21 April 2010) sees the launch of a new research project looking at how policy makers should respond to the threat of harmful new drugs by developing a brand new 'constitution' for drug control.

The **UK Drug Policy Commission** and think-tank **Demos** are joining forces to examine how drug control in the UK can be handled in different ways. The research collaboration, funded by the **A B Charitable Trust**, has been set up to look at new approaches to drug control and classification by reviewing international approaches and bringing together experts from drug enforcement, regulation, medicine control, the public and trading standards.

The Commission said there are now 600 compounds controlled by the Misuse of Drugs Act but the British Crime Survey (BCS) data (2008/09) showed classification has little bearing on drug prevalence and use (1), when the position of cocaine as a class A drug has not stopped use rising, while successive changes to the classification of cannabis, first down to class C then back to class B, had no discernible impact on the steady reduction in prevalence.

The Academy of Medical Sciences, the Royal Society of Arts and the UK Drug Policy Commission have all argued over the past four years for a reappraisal of the drug classification system, and the ways policy makers respond to the challenge of controlling harmful substances. Back in September 2008, the UK Drug Policy Commission called for a wide review of the classification system including an examination of its purpose as well as an enquiry into how decisions about controlling substances are made.

Growing concern about the current system of drug control has been amplified by the government's rejection of recommendations of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs over the past few years on cannabis and ecstasy, resulting last year in the sacking of its Chair and the resignation of more than a quarter of its members (most scientists). On top of all this there has been much disquiet over the approach taken by both the Government and the ACMD on the decision to ban the drug mephedrone and similar substances. This has led to political parties (2) recently calling for a wholly independent Advisory Council and the bringing forward of new mechanisms to establish temporary bans on new substances, in their election manifestos.

Demos has been leading on the application of systems-based approaches to complex problems through publications such as *System Failure* (2001) and *Connecting the Dots* (2009). These reports have laid the foundation for a new consideration and decision framework that focuses attention away from the merits of individual policies, to how issues are framed.

Through joint research collaboration the **UK Drug Policy Commission** and **Demos** seek to find new approaches to drug control as alternatives to the classification system for a new government committed to change and reform.

Roger Howard, Chief Executive of the UK Drug Policy Commission said: “The Commission has had a long standing commitment to look at the drug control system, to find better ways for government, and other agencies, to deal with the harm caused by drugs in our society. Through this unique collaboration with Demos we hope to help formulate potential new drug control processes that are ‘fit for our time’, so the strategic capacity of the system to react to new threats is improved and public, professional and scientific confidence is renewed.”

Jonathan Birdwell, lead Researcher at Demos said: “The furore about drugs like mephedrone has put this issue in the spotlight. At the moment the policies we have to regulate ‘legal highs’ are totally inadequate for the problem. This project will get past the hype and focus on what the evidence is, what the aims of policy should be – and how to reach them.”

Yves Bonavero, Chairman of the A B Charitable Trust said: “We are delighted to announce this partnership that is the first of its kind looking at innovative approaches to drug control. The sooner policy makers feel they have the evidence to bring about reform, the sooner people who are concerned about drugs, or are worried about harm, will get the answers they need.”

The research project is expected to start immediately and complete by October 2010. The UK Drug Policy Commission and Demos expect to be publishing the results towards the end of 2010.

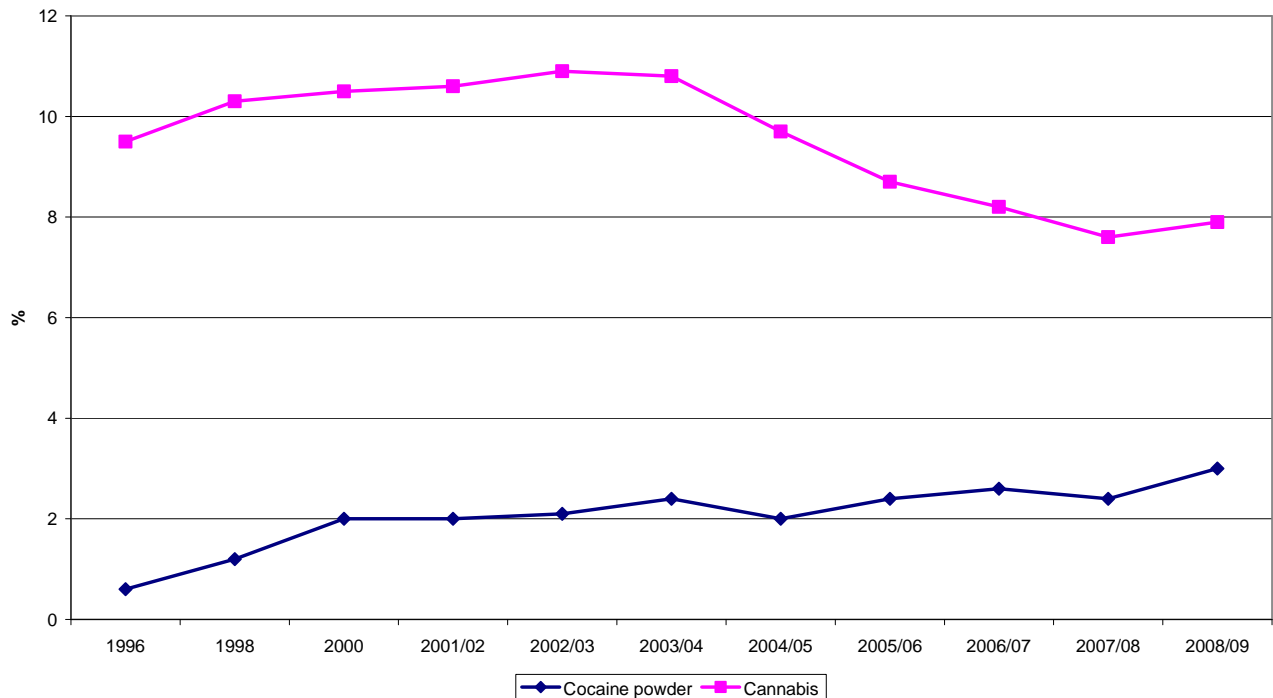
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Notes for editors

1.) FACTS: British Crime Survey (BCS) 2008/09:

- There are now over 650 compounds controlled by the Misuse of Drugs Act
- In 1996 0.6% of 15-59 years olds reported past year use of cocaine (powder), which has continued to be a Class A drug. By 2008/09 this had risen to 3%
- Cannabis was downgraded to Class C in 2004 and subsequently upgraded back to Class B in 2009 – despite the downwards re-classification there was a continuing reduction in use. In 1996 9.5% of 15-59 year olds reported use of the drug – It was 10.8% in 2003/04, dropping to 7.9% by 2008/09

Trends in drug use in the last year: Cannabis & Cocaine (British Crime Survey 1996 - 2008/09)



2.) On drug policy the **Liberal Democrats GE manifesto (2010)** said the party is 'committed to always basing drugs policy on independent scientific advice'. It also said the party would 'make the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs completely independent of government'. The **Conservative GE manifesto (2010)** said the party would 'introduce a system of temporary bans on new "legal highs" while health issues are considered by independent experts'.

3.) To secure interviews or receive further background briefing contact Victoria Silver (UKDPC) 020 7821 3792 or 07866 757 389

4.) The UK Drug Policy Commission recently suggested (March 2010) that a new, (temporary) drug control category should be introduced (Category X) for legal substances of concern, as a way of flagging up the need for the urgent review of the evidence of harms

QUESTIONS:

Q. What is the UKDPC?

A. The UK Drug Policy Commission was launched in April 2007 as an independent - time limited - body (charity) to provide objective analysis of UK government's drug policy. The Commission's Chair is Dame Ruth Runciman DBE. The Commissioners are: Professor Colin Blakemore FRS, Annette Dale-Perera, Professor Baroness Haleh Afshar OBE, Jeremy Hardie FCA MA MPhil CBE, Professor John Strang, David Blakey CBE QPM, Tracey Brown (Sense about Science), Adam Sampson (Chief Ombudsman, Office for Legal Complaints), Professor the Baroness Finlay of Llandaff & Vivienne Parry (scientist, writer and broadcaster)

Q. What is Demos?

Demos is an independent think tank focused on power and politics. They develop and spread ideas to give people more power over their own lives. Their vision is of a democracy of powerful citizens, with an equal stake in society.

Demos has several core research programmes in 2010: Capabilities, Citizenship, Extremism and Violence, Public Finance and Economic Life. They also have two political research programmes: the Progressive Conservatism Project and Open Left, investigating the future of the centre-Right and centre-Left.

In all Demos' work they bring together people from a wide range of backgrounds to develop ideas that will shape debate in the UK and beyond, and engage in a broad and diverse audience worldwide.

Find out more about Demos' work at www.demos.co.uk

Q. What is A B Charitable Trust?

A. The A B Charitable Trust (ABCT) is an independent, UK based grant-making organisation founded in 1990 that is concerned with promoting and defending human dignity. ABCT supports charities that defend human rights, such as freedom from torture and arbitrary imprisonment, and promotes respect for individuals whatever their circumstances.

Q. How is the UKDPC funded?

A. From the Esmee Fairbairn Foundation, one of the largest philanthropic bodies in the UK, which aims, through its grants, to improve the quality of life for people and communities in the UK. Consequently UKDPC is independent of government and any special interests both in resourcing our work and deciding on work programme priorities.

Q. What does the UKDPC hope to achieve?

A. Our overarching aim is to encourage a transparent and evidence-led UK drug policy. UKDPC believes we need to find new ways of dealing with drugs that minimises harm to people and communities. UKDPC is working with many expert partners to help shape a new policy framework so that good decisions – about drug control, prevention, enforcement and treatment – can be made consistently and with the best use of the evidence available. Over the next two years UKDPC will be commissioning research and collecting evidence about what works, then making our proposals to government. To find out more: www.ukdpc.org.uk