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MASSIVE REVIEW OF LAW ON DRUGS

MINISTERS are preparing a sweeping review of the drug classification system.

Home Secretary Charles Clarke is expected to launch a public consultation on how illegal substances are graded.

The move is certain to reopen the debate on the classification of ecstasy. Campaigners have long argued that neither the clubbing drug, nor cocaine and magic mushrooms, should be in the same category as heroin.

Mr Clarke was expected to announce the surprise review today after confirm-

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Political Correspondent

ing that he will not change the status of cannabis back from class C to B. He believes links between marijuana and mental illness are not strong enough to justify altering the law again.

But in a move that could lead to dramatic changes in the way police and courts deal with offences, he is expected to concede that the system for categorising drugs may send misleading signals about how harmful certain substances are.

It would be the first government-approved wholesale review of the

drugs laws since 1971. Key issues to be considered would include whether ecstasy and LSD should be downgraded from class A to class B so they are no longer bracketed with highly addictive drugs such as heroin and crack cocaine.

The last authoritative study of the drugs laws, carried out for the Police Foundation and chaired by Dame Ruth Runciman five years ago, said ecstasy should be downgraded and that no one should ever go to prison for possessing small amounts of cocaine.

Any change in ecstasy's status would be politically explosive and trigger

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Drug review to reopen the debate on ecstasy

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an outcry from relatives of young people killed by the drug. Tory leader David Cameron has called for ecstasy to be downgraded, but there is no suggestion that the Home Office is encouraging the change.

Under the Misuse of Drugs Act, drugs are categorised as Class A, B or C, with possession or supply of Class A substances attracting the highest penalties.

The most notorious substance in Class A is heroin. Campaigners say magic mushrooms and ecstasy are not comparable, because they are not as addictive.



Downgraded: the Standard's report on Monday. The status of cannabis is unlikely to change

Pressure groups say the entire system is riddled with anomalies, leaving the public confused.

Details of Mr Clarke's decision are being kept under wraps until he makes a formal statement to MPs at Westminster today.

However, he is expected to tell them that although the Advisory Committee on the Misuse of Drugs

concluded that there was a risk of cannabis users developing schizophrenia, the drug is "substantially less harmful" than others in the Class B category.

Among other substances in that class are amphetamines (speed) and barbiturates.

A submission to the advisory committee by the Transform Drugs Policy

Foundation said the system is "fundamentally flawed".

It said: "Drug harms are mediated by the nature of the user, the dose of drugs consumed and the method of consumption. Translating generalisations about harms to an entire population into penalties for individuals is unscientific and unjust."

Abandoning drugs classi-

fications altogether is not thought to be on the agenda.

At present, a conviction for possession of a Class A drug carries a maximum seven-year prison sentence; while conviction for supply or intent to supply can lead to life in prison. The maximum penalty for possession of Class B drugs is five years in prison, rising to 14 years for supplying the drug.

The maximum penalty for possession of Class C drugs — cannabis, anabolic steroids, benzodiazepines, and tranquillisers such as valium — is two years, rising to 14 years for supplying it.