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Drug policy in the Americas

At last, a debate

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And an intemperate defence of prohibition

Agencia Estado

EVER since George Bush senior launched “the war on drugs” in earnest two decades ago, Latin American governments have been more or less willing belligerents. That was partly because of the carrot and stick of American aid and bullying, but mainly because they suffer the brunt of the violence and corruption inflicted by trafficking mafias. Yet now there are signs of a rethink.

The clearest came in February when the Latin American Commission on Drugs and Democracy, a group headed by three former presidents—Fernando Henrique Cardoso of Brazil, César Gaviria of Colombia and Ernesto Zedillo of Mexico—published a report arguing that the violent crime and corruption generated by drug prohibition is undermining democracy and that the drug war has “failed”. They called for a public debate on alternatives, including treating drug use as an issue of public health rather than criminal law, and decriminalising marijuana.



Cardoso calls for new thinking

This approach is gaining adherents. At least one minister in Brazil’s government agreed with the report. Even as it battles the drug gangs, Mexico has decided that people caught with small amounts of drugs should be treated rather than prosecuted. Argentina and Ecuador are considering more radical decriminalisation. Mr Cardoso, who has retired from political office, has since gone further than the commission and called for the decriminalisation of cocaine. He says that many active politicians privately agree with him. And in the United States, the Obama administration has signalled a shift away from drug “war” and mass incarceration and towards policies that treat drugs as a health issue.

This fracture in the taboo on questioning drug prohibition seems to have rattled Antonio Maria Costa, the boss of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. In his preface to the annual World Drug Report, released this week, he concedes that drug users need “medical help not criminal retribution”.

But he also implies that proponents of drug legalisation—who include *The Economist*—are really seeking fresh sources of tax revenue to rescue failed banks. (No, Mr Costa, to pay for drug treatment and education.) Grotesquely, he equates legalising drugs and human trafficking. (Drugs primarily harm the user whereas trafficking harms others.) He claims legalisation would “unleash a drug epidemic in the developing world”. (That is what prohibition is achieving, because the criminal gangs it generates in developing countries have started supplying their local markets.) He smears his critics as “pro-drug” (as absurd as suggesting he

is "pro-crime"). This kind of hysteria smacks of an organisation that is not just losing an unwinnable war but losing the argument.

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