



# ANDREW ON WEDNESDAY

# Cannabis: A no-go

I need to declare my position: I am not ready to subscribe to a social policy that justifies legalising cannabis by citing 'harm reduction'.

As I esteem the hard work that Hon. Julia Farrugia Portelli is doing, the arguments she made during an event organised by The President's Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society, as reported by the media, are of concern. She states:

"We are taking a holistic approach by which we intend to address the matter and its problems at its core ... In doing so, we intend to have the adequate building blocks in place, those being structurally designed educational programmes, a national strategy on alternative means of recreation such as sport, art, music and more, and re-engineering our existing support services and changing them into a proactive support mechanism rather than a reactive one."

Hon Farrugia Portelli seems to admit that this is a 'problem'. What I find rather inconsistent is that she continues to say:

"At the same time we want to regulate the use of cannabis around a harm reduction mechanism by which we address the actual problems and dangers of the underground illicit drug trafficking in order to protect users..."

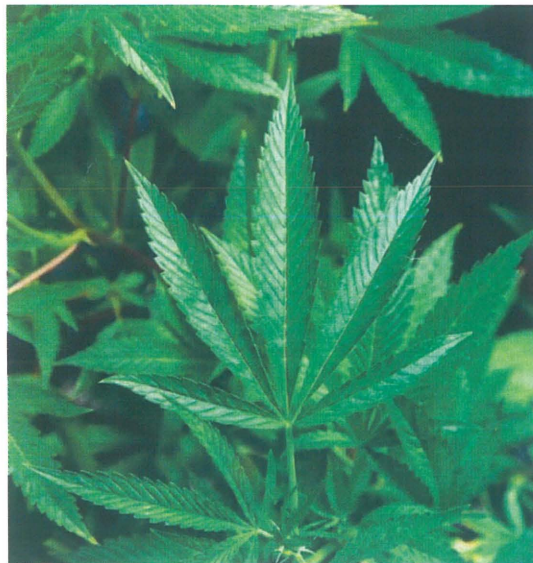
(<https://govinmalta.com/lifestyle/interview/our-strategy-is-to-create-champions-and-achievers-julia-farrugia-portelli-on-the-future-of-cannabis-legalisation-in-malta>)

Admitting to a predicament and then reacting by 'regulating' this same problem is bewildering.

We can call it harm reduction until we are blue in the face. We can call it whatever we want to but from where I stand the negative impact of this substance compared to the 'benefits', some might quote, are unparalleled. Obviously, I am not referring to the use of certain components of cannabis for medicinal use. That goes without saying. I'm perfectly fine, once the medical community is good with that (if you had to ask me, I believe we should have taken that step so many years ago).

But legitimising drug use that alters a state of consciousness and that will bring about 'pleasure' by manipulating emotions, feelings and perceptions is not something I subscribe to. For me it is never the 'in' thing to do because once cannabis has made its way to the person's body it has an intoxicating effect - this is a fact.

Now let us be clear here because I can see this argument being swung at me. It is true that alcohol is being consumed practically on a daily basis with



its own noxious effect, the same as nicotine. The difference here is that unfortunately these substances have infiltrated our way of life and now we are struggling to try to reverse the impact that these have on the human person. As the proverbial saying goes, 'two wrongs don't make a right!'

So should we eliminate nicotine and alcohol?

Well if it were for me, probably it would be the best route to take because this is not simply about abolitionism, but about allowing people to live improved and better lifestyles, quality life that prevents injury to self and others. So the argument in favour of obliteration is there for all to see. But we all know that this business is way too powerful and Government is weak when faced with these business magnates.

So what we get in the meantime are the occasional tokenistic legislation initiatives to attempt damage control and keep some people alienated; 'that we are doing something about it'. We have seen initiatives like macabre pictures printed on cigarette packets, not allowing smoking in cars, restaurants and public places. When it comes to alcohol we keep trying to put down the drinking limit and promote new-fangled policy measures. This keeps the general public 'on cloud nine' whilst the industry thrives, blooms and blossoms.

Now back to cannabis.

The impact of the use of this substance is not short of wor-

rying. I'm not going to make the chestnut argument that it is a gateway drug. The impact of cannabis is what it is and useless trying to get away from the facts. Cannabis use will include dizziness and loss of rational behaviour exemplified by being giggly and out for control, having blood shot eyes and difficulties recalling information.

Cannabis is known to damage a person's health over time. It effects short-term memory and will come in the way when one is trying to handle complex tasks. Reaction time is impacted. More risky sexual behaviour due to lack of control (for example having unsafe sex) is to be expected and it might also lead to the lessening of concentration on one's studies or job. No need to remind you that in the case of athletes', use of cannabis will curtail performance. It is also a known fact that cannabis has carcinogenic components in it. Cannabis has also been known to increase anxiety and paranoia and there is evidence "that regular cannabis use increases the risk of developing psychotic illnesses, such as schizophrenia, particularly in adolescents" quoting, Dr Marta di Forti, from King's College London.

(<https://www.bbc.com/news/health-44532417>)

If you had to add that this substance makes it increasingly dangerous for the malleable brain of young people who are still developing with potential memory impairment - that just seems to do it for me.

Someone please convince me that this is the way to go!

Some argue that at the end of the day the market is what it is and legalising it will prevent illicit use and sale, a controlled market will get the traffickers out of the way and it will also provide treatment for people who cannot manage this situation.

Well I find these arguments disturbing and incomplete. Once again from where I stand I cannot think of a policy strategy that will justify walking a tight rope and hope that whoever falls has a safety net to grab hold of them - utterly baffling.

I want to see a real concerted effort by the State and not just the Government to resolve this problem; because cannabis is a tight spot we need to reckon with. Putting it on sale does not sort it out.

We need to:

- decriminalise cannabis use;
- encourage the police corps who work in the community to get better training in the area;
- improve youth work training and increase detached youth work services;
- allure more collaboration between the three main agencies operating in our Country in the area of addictions, namely, Caritas Malta, Agency Sedqa and Oasi Foundation;
- work towards a social policy that is based on prevention;
- provide incentives for the development of more leisure activities that will ensure young people do not get caught in a spiral of boredom;
- provide emotional education to children and young people, thus helping them handle situations of pressure and disillusionment.

Instead of a country that is keen on being at the top of the league table to show 'how progressive we are', on this matter we really need to do the right thing and call a spade a spade. The risks of legalising cannabis for 'leisure', 'harm reduction', 'personal use', call it what you want, however strict and controlled the systems are, is way too risky.

Legalising cannabis, in my opinion, is a declaration of failure in our social policy, social welfare agencies, NGOs and Police Force. Once it will be legalised it will be impossible to retract that position. The twisted industry interests and the political pressures shouldn't define our social landscape. This is the time for our politicians to show us what mettle they are made of.

**Ghandi xi Nghid**

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