

Memo to the Chancellor: Fancy a cool billion pounds from a legal cannabis market? by Jamie Doward

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From her Oxfordshire home, Amanda Feilding leads a group with the sort of academic and political influence that could see cannabis being legalised – and, crucially, regulated

Beckley Park, a moated redbrick pile built during the reign of Henry VIII and set among rolling acres of chocolate box Oxfordshire countryside, looks the sort of place that could inspire writers to hyperbole. Its gardens boast perfect boxwood topiary; firs burn in huge grates and long dead nobility look down imperiously from thick stone walls.

So it is no surprise to learn that Beckley has featured in at least one novel. The author of *Brave New World*, Aldous Huxley set his first book, *Crome Yellow*, at Beckley using it to satirise a group of guests attending a party at the house, described by one character as ‘unmistakably and aggressively a work of art.’

Huxley, famous for writing *The Doors of Perception*, an exploration of an altered state of consciousness experienced while he took the drug mescaline, the book that inspired Jim Morrison and his band to call themselves *The Doors*, was a visitor to the home in the 1920s.

But not even a visionary like Huxley could have foreseen that Beckley would go on pushing at the doors of perception long after he had died.

In the last fifteen years the grade I listed home has been the headquarters of the Beckley Foundation, an increasingly influential think tank that is pushing at the boundaries of drug reform with a persistence that has seen it amass a strong body of academic and political support but has also seen it plunged into controversy.

Headed by Amanda Feilding, who prefers not to use her title, Countess of Wemyss and March, the Foundation has been responsible for drafting open letters signed by past and present presidents, politicians, businessmen and other global leaders that have done much to push the case for global drug reform.

‘Drugs are more heavily regulated than nuclear weapons,’ said Feilding who stresses she is not a proponent of a *laissez-faire*, unregulated drugs policy.

‘It’s not for making drugs available at Tescos’ but common sense suggests the answer is regulation,’ she said. ‘But we’ve got caught in a terrible misconception about drugs,’ Feilding said. ‘We all know people who have died and suffered from them. But 200,000 people a year around the world die from all illegal drugs, compared with five million from tobacco.’

Beckley was responsible for producing a scale of harm register for drugs, both legal and illegal and ranking them according to the risks they posed users. The register has been taken up widely across Europe.

While there is no doubt Feilding, who has a deep interest in mysticism, makes an unusual head of a think tank, she believes her organisation’s outsider status has meant it has been more able to challenge the status quo.

‘I think because I live in this isolated place I’m more free from taboos,’ said Feilding who believes the world is missing a huge opportunity by failing to properly explore the medicinal properties of illegal drugs.

She has instigated, co-authored and funded research conducted by Johns Hopkins University into how the combined use of magic mushrooms and psychotherapy can produce what Feilding claims is an almost 100% success-rate in helping people quit smoking cigarettes.

She has also initiated, co-authored and funded research by several prestigious British universities such as UCL, Kings College and Imperial, looking into a range of issues such as whether MDMA (ecstasy) can help people with post-traumatic stress disorder, whether psilocybin can help treat depression, whether LSD can be used in the treatment of dementia, and whether cannabis makes a useful analgesic, or can increase creativity.

It is this latter drug that is currently occupying much of Feilding's thought. Cannabis, she believes, is the "elephant in the room". It comprises around 80% of all the illicit drugs consumed in the world and is used by an estimated 166m of its 200m drug users.

As she writes in a foreword to an academic review of cannabis policy, "Without cannabis...the number of illegal drug-users in the world would total...40 million people -arguably too small a number to justify the vast costs (of the war on drugs)."

This week, Beckley will fire another salvo into the drugs debate when it publishes a 163 page cost-benefit analysis examining what would happen if cannabis were licensed and regulated in England and Wales.

The study, conducted by the widely respected Institute for Social and Economic Research, is a model of academic analysis, carefully caveating its findings and outlining three scenarios illustrating what would happen to demand if cannabis was decriminalised.

Few such studies have been attempted before and most have made wild assumptions. "One of the difficulties in working in this area is that the public debate is so low quality," explained one of the report's authors, Stephen Pudney, professor of economics at Essex University. "There are lots of people taking one side or another. Our intention was almost to make a shopping list of things you would need to achieve (in terms of regulation) to have a better debate."

The ISER's research is likely to be studied closely by politicians in the US states of Colorado and Washington who have voted to legalise marijuana, as well as nations like Ecuador, which have decriminalised the drug, and Uruguay which is to become the first country to introduce a legal, regulated market for cannabis, encouraging growers and sellers to produce enough to put drug traffickers out of business.

The report examines 13 factors, including the cost of policing and courts, mental health services, the cost of regulating the new market and potential increases in crime and the uptake of other illegal drugs as a result of more people taking cannabis.

It assumes cannabis would be taxed at 70% (compared with 72% for alcohol and 83% for tobacco) and that the level of THC - the mind-altering substance found in cannabis - would be restricted to 10% compared with around 15% in much of the cannabis sold on Britain's streets now.

Agreeing a level of taxation is difficult, Pudney admits. Too low and there would be claims the government is promoting drug consumption. Too high and the illicit market would continue to thrive.

"Same debate as tobacco," Pudney said. "If you raise taxes it encourages smuggling."

Under the most plausible scenarios outlined in the report, a licensed cannabis market would see consumption of the drug in volume terms rise between 15 and 20% while the illicit or unlicensed share would remain somewhere between 20 and 30%.

The report suggests: "We estimate that tax revenue from licensed cannabis supply in England and Wales would fall somewhere in the range £0.4-0.9bn."

And, once the reduced costs such as policing, and the extra costs such as regulation are factored in, the authors believe "the contribution of cannabis licensing in England and Wales to reduction of the government deficit is expected to lie in the range £0.5-1.25bn."

But to focus simply on the numbers would miss a key point, Pudney argued. Regulation would allow the government to control the licensed drug's content. For example, the government could insist that the CBD content of the drug, the anti-psychotic component which balances out THC, was increased.

In this way, a regulated market might help counter the huge explosion in skunk, the potent strain of cannabis that has high THC levels linked to psychosis.

"If you are going to protect the young then I believe governments can do a better job than the cartels," Feilding said.

"People like changing their consciousness and they're going to go on liking it."

Huxley would agree.

The Observer article by Jamie Doward