

Division in the UK Cannabis Movement

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Over this piece I wish to discuss the division and infighting in the UK cannabis legalization movement. Many accuse the leader of Cannabis Law Reform party (CLEAR), Peter Reynolds for his divisive behaviour in causing this split.

“Divide and conquer” is a proverb describing the best way to win a fight without blood spilt on your own side. The UK cannabis legalization movement is split – over this admittedly partial article I wish to discuss the reasons given by those who have left the main movement to unite under different flags.

In 2010 many Californian medical marijuana dispensaries joined the “no” campaign over Proposition 19, a referendum in the state to legalize and regulate all cannabis use. They felt that their protections under existing state law would be removed, so found it to be in their businesses’ interests to keep the status quo. This may have been originated by effective diplomacy on the part of the anti marijuana campaign – it would certainly have been a good move if the no camp had. In splitting the yes camp, so Proposition 19 was rejected earlier this year.

Division isn’t always sown by the opposition. Sadly, a particularly divisive character in a prominent position within a campaign can make other powerful players in their campaign turn against them. Instead of being coached to fight each other from the outside, the campaign may implode spontaneously. As a supporter of the pro legalization campaign, it dismays me that infighting has erupted in this way in the UK with Reynolds’ behaviour.

For many years the UK’s movement was led by an organization called the Legalise Cannabis Alliance. It was registered as a political party, and was very effective. At the peak of the LCA’s powers the UK briefly reclassified

cannabis as a Class C drug from Class B. Under the classification system you can theoretically do jail time for being caught with even a small amount of Class A, which includes LSD and heroin. Class B is recognised as a safer drug, but you can be punished for possession. Class C merited a police warning if you were over 18, though under 18’s, growers and dealers would face punishment. Don Barnard was a leading light in the LCA. He remembers, “I never imagined I would have a meeting with the Home Secretary to discuss drugs law reform. It shows how far we came to achieve that.”

It took the dogmatic Prime Minister Gordon Brown who ignored the scientific understanding of the drug and reclassified it as Class B soon after inheriting the Premiership from Tony Blair.

Alun Buffry is a long time cannabis campaigner, who was actively involved in the LCA. The LCA did not have a leader, wishing to run by a leadership committee. Buffry says, “the Electoral Commission said they required the information and I asked if it could be recorded as “for the purposes of registration only”; they agreed but said they could only show it as leader.”

Reynolds ran for election to become head of the LCA in February 2011. According to Buffry, for the purpose of having a democratic vote only, an ally of Reynolds ran against him. “There were two candidates, PR and Stuart Warwick who said he was only standing to make it an election and that he supported and would vote for PR. I asked each to supply an A4 manifesto as each did, they were very similar.”

Reynolds won by 62% against 16% who voted against him, the rest who voted for him to share the leadership with Warwick. In many democracies, a 62% majority is a

very strong mandate. Why then did the rot set in?

One of the first things that caused warfare was over the LCA's and then CLEAR's website in early 2011. Don Barnard complains that Reynolds sought to erase history on his taking over the LCA website. Instead of transferring the site and links to ccguide.org, "PR arbitrarily ordered the LCA site to be taken down redirecting search engines to CLEAR where all links and references to the LCA were broken and replaced by PR". Many feel that this was an attempt to rewrite history. A number left the organization.

In March 2012 a feud erupted over the hosting of the CLEAR website – 7 people were reported to the police over false accusations of hacking the site. CLEAR was in meltdown and Executive member Chris Bovey led a coup against Reynolds. Bovey says, "by this time there were only three on the Executive as well as Reynolds so we voted to eject him as leader. We put a message on the website that Reynolds had been removed. He refused to accept this and called the police."

The word went out that Bovey and 6 others had hacked the site and shut the website down. They were reported to the police. Bovey says "Reynolds put messages on the Facebook page saying that we were about to be arrested imminently. Amongst the seven accused was one guy who was jointly on a suspended prison sentence with his long time girlfriend for possession and she left him due to the stress." Under UK law a "suspended sentence" is essentially a period of time outside prison, where you must behave well - you can be "recalled to prison" without being put before a judge if you break the law while on a suspended sentence. Bovey thought to check the allegations of his imminent arrest with the police, only to find this was not true at all.

Accusations of vexatious reporting of Reynolds' foes to the police are not new. Many have been – including myself when I responded to threats made against me in a direct and somewhat masculine way. His email suggested he would report me to the police - "it definitely falls under the Malicious Communications Act 1988, section 1 and the Communications Act 2003, section 127."

CLEAR also inherited some US \$6000 in fighting funds from the LCA and raised a further \$15000. This has been spent in less than 12 months. Many wonder where and how – though none outside the CLEAR Executive know. Accusations abound, but the accounts were filed legally and nothing firm can be interpreted from the deliberately vague statement given to the UK Electoral Commission. Many former LCA members have left and from what can be seen, only a trickle of money comes in to replace the flood of cash that went out.

Reynolds is not afraid to whip people with his tongue. In

being called a "dirty hippy" Barnard recoils, and says he isn't the only one put to the sword by the leader of CLEAR's comments: "PR has alienated a legion of respectable hard working campaigners over the years calling them names which I believe would more accurately describe himself and some of his cohorts".

More productively Barnard says that Reynolds has alienated much of the media. "PR has also alienated a number of reporters and researchers who were long term sympathizer to the cause since I joined the media merry go round in 1994".

Such fearlessness of the media alienated myself. I received an email from PR that left me nervous about walking the streets in my own village, in which he lives as well. Amongst many other things, the direct threat suggested: "Don't let me bump into you in the street until I've had an apology!"

Turning the media against you in a campaign that requires a very good media image to fight dogma and misplaced stigma surrounding the issue, is a poor move to make. In a June 2012 article the Watford Observer, a local newspaper ran the headline "Peter Reynolds rants about the obnoxious people of Bovington".

Opening the article the journalist wrote, "One of the country's most prominent pro-cannabis campaigners has branded the people of Bovington "nasty, selfish and dirty" in an online rant." Bovington residents would be part of the key battleground in any serious move to change the law in regard cannabis. It is best described as a dormitory town of London where middle class workers live while working in the city.

One of the major issues held by his opponents that will impact on the wider electorate is Reynolds' casual racism. Reynolds repeatedly denies this but there have been allegations that he has been at one time recently, a member of a political association allied to the far right British National Party (BNP). Asking people about his attitude to race, they will come up with a host of blogs and emails that show his alleged beliefs. One email shown to me was written by Reynolds and refers to a one time ally of his whose family originated from the Indian subcontinent.

Reynolds says to Sanj Chowdhary, who was then on the CLEAR Executive committee, "Abso-bloody-lootely spot on the Paki bashing button, Senor Chowdhary". One wonders, what is Reynolds like toward people of different races he dislikes if he refers to a friend as a "Paki"?

Blogs written by Reynolds that would offend one race or other are legion. He is quoted as stating, "Islam has become a source of great evil in the world and it is time we reconsidered our patience and tolerance of it. We have

been taken advantage of. “Multiculturalism” is not only a dreadful word but an idea that is making no sense. Immigrants don’t want it either. When they come here they want to group themselves into ghettos. They separate themselves from our national culture. They want all the benefits of what we stand for without any responsibility.“ The actual blog has been deleted from the internet but before deletion was quoted on the ccguide.org website.

In the UK the best way to marginalise an issue is to associate it with the far right. There is a cat and mouse game in politics between what the far right would associate itself with (and therefore sully) and mainstream politics would. Immigration has become quite liberal as a result of the BNP’s association with it – and any aims to tighten it up face accusations of aligning with the party. Associating cannabis legalisation with the far right would kill it for a generation. Thankfully the “mainstream far right” wishes to execute cannabis dealers so the odd supporter of the BNP wishing for cannabis legalisation isn’t

going to send it into that hole for the minute!

Sadly, with such division and infighting, the cannabis legalisation movement has been too busily chewing itself to bits to be an effective fighting force within any stratum of politics. As a last word, we look to the future. The US National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws (NORML) has opened a UK branch, run by much of CLEAR’s former Executive. In the LCA’s way they do not have a specific leader, and are run by committee. NORML UK are trying to fight a positive campaign and forget the internecine warfare. The UK national newspaper The Independent has recently reported on a couple of campaigns they are running.

From what little I have seen, this positive attitude – to change the law, not to fight each other, shows new shoots of hope for the movement. I lay hopes for a future for the campaign as a whole, and that NORML UK can lead the way in the fight against legislation that is internationally recognised as unjust. **■**