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Autor: Crivelli, Pablo

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Legalising the joint?

Unless a referendum to the contrary is launched, smoking marihuana and hashish will become legal in Switzerland in 2004. There should be no shortage of the raw material: our country is the largest producer of hemp in Europe. What's more, the market is booming. Here in Switzerland 87,000 people smoke a joint every day, while at least one quarter of those aged between 15 and 24 smoke joints occasionally and 700,000 have tried it at least once.

Swiss "grass" is high quality and often comes with a THC content (tetrahydrocannabinol is the narcotic substance) in excess of 15 percent. So modern-day marihuana is much stronger than it was 20 years ago. This can induce a range of side-effects and give rise to anxiety, panic, disorientation, confusion and depression. The hemp business has an estimated annual turnover of CHF 1 billion. Small wonder, then, that Swiss farmers are in favour of reforming the present law and legalising so-called soft drugs, which they view as a welcome source of income.

The laxity of the authorities coupled with legal loopholes has also contributed to the spread of illicit hemp farming. Over the past ten years the number of such plantations has rocketed, and hundreds of hemp shops have sprung up.

Added to this, border regions like Basle and the Ticino have seen the growth of a new phenomenon: hemp tourism.

"A decision with such far-reaching social and political consequences calls for an equally broad-based discussion."



Pablo Crivelli

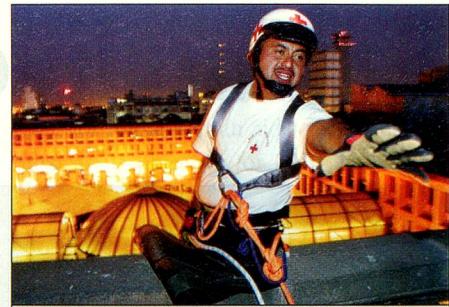
The Federal Council's proposed revision of the 1951 law on narcotics would put the lid on such developments, decriminalising the consumption of marihuana and hashish from age 16. Growing of cannabis would remain illegal in principle but be tolerated by the Federal Council under certain conditions. However, hemp farmers would have to declare the THC content of their produce and be prohibited from selling to foreigners.

To make the consumption of soft drugs less attractive, a National Council commission recommends levying a tax on marihuana and hashish. Half of the income from such a tax – around CHF 300 million – would go towards the AHV, a quarter to the invalidity insurance fund, and the remainder towards preventive measures.

Some groups find it immoral to finance the AHV and IV by levying taxes on a young people's vice, while others question the appropriateness of legalising the consumption of soft drugs while the authorities continue to combat the devastating consequences of tobacco and alcohol consumption. The SVP and the Liberals in western Switzerland claim the proposed policy is too permissive and are threatening to launch a referendum. They are not alone in their criticism: the Swiss Association of Teachers has expressed concern at the rise in drug and alcohol consumption among schoolchildren and is campaigning to retain the status quo on soft drugs.

Moreover, given the concerns voiced by the Italian authorities who have to deal with hemp tourism, and by the UN which has denounced the legalisation of soft drugs in various European countries as a historic mistake, a referendum can only be hoped for. A decision with such far-reaching social and political consequences calls for an equally broad-based discussion. If the Federal Council tackles this hurdle, it would strengthen its position at home and abroad.

Pablo Crivelli



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The International Committee of the Red Cross based in Geneva has 12,000 employees working in all corners of the world. Its mission is to provide assistance and protect the lives and dignity of victims of war.

COVER: Patrick Lüthy



Patrick Lüthy
Saving lives, relieving suffering
Arrangement for old states
Victory for the government

SWISS REVIEW

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Gabrielle Keller (gk), Editor-in-Chief; Rolf Ribi (RR); Isabelle Eichenberger (IE); Pablo Crivelli (PC); Gabriela Brodbeck (BDK), responsible for the Official News, Swiss Abroad Service EDA, CH-3003 Berne. Translation: Nicolette Chisholm.

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