

Drugs in the Netherlands

Closed shops

Why tourists in the Netherlands may have to stop smoking pot

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THE myth of Dutch tolerance may have faded in recent years, but the country still cherishes its social liberalism. Prostitution is legal, soft drugs are available to locals and foreign tourists alike, and the Netherlands prides itself on blazing the trail for gay marriage. But one of these traditions may be on the way out. In a rolling process, Dutch “coffee shops”, where cannabis is freely sold for private consumption, could soon become closed clubs.

New government rules may force some 660 coffee shops that now sell cannabis over the counter to become members-only clubs with strict registration procedures, accessible only to Dutch residents. The government says the new policy is a bid to curb the “nuisance” of drug tourists and to fight organised crime. The measures will first be introduced in southern provinces that have most cannabis tourists. The government hopes to anchor the guidelines in a change of official policy to be debated in parliament in September.



Not everybody must get stoned

According to Derrick Bergman, head of VOC, a lobby group that fights for the legalisation of marijuana, approval of the guidelines could mean the “end of the coffee shop as we know it.” This will affect more than the country’s desirability as a destination for backpackers or the turnover of a cannabis market worth hundreds of millions of euros. Mr Bergman fears the emergence of a new criminality, such as illegal trade in membership passes or street dealing, which could increase exposure to hard drugs.

The guidelines may not survive a legal challenge for discrimination. A potentially precedent-setting case was initiated by a coffee-shop owner from Maastricht, a southern Dutch city, against an earlier decision by the city’s mayor to impose a membership scheme for residents only. After wrangling in Dutch and EU courts (which allowed an apparent breach of the single market on health grounds), the case is now being considered by the Council of State, the highest Dutch appeal body. The council’s decision will affect the legality of the planned new coffee-shop regime.

The Dutch government is led by liberals and backed by a far-right party that claims Islam is incompatible with liberal democratic values. It recently tried (and failed) to regulate prostitution through a system of passes. The nature of Dutch liberalism is certainly changing.

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