

Jack Straw: We made a mistake on cannabis

By Christopher Hope, Home Affairs Correspondent

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The Justice Minister, Jack Straw, became the most senior Labour minister last night to speak out against the decriminalisation of cannabis.

He told Channel Four News that he was against downgrading it to a class C drug.

"I was always against it, let me say, I can disclose this now, reducing the categorisation of cannabis from B to C, I thought that was an error," he said.

"I'm glad to know that we are now looking again at that. I don't think decriminalisation would work.

"I'm happy to have a debate about that, but I'm absolutely clear - what we know about cannabis now, more than we did even five and 10 years ago, is the way it can lead to very serious exacerbation of mental health problems."

Gordon Brown, in his conference speech yesterday, promised that the Government would be tough on drugs.

Last month, he indicated that he was ready to reverse the downgrading of cannabis.

He told GMTV: "It is the message you send out.

"Why I want to upgrade cannabis and make it more a drug that people worry about is that we don't want to send out a message - just like with alcohol - to teenagers that we accept these things."

The reclassification announced by the then Home Secretary David Blunkett in 2001 came into effect in 2004 and meant users no longer faced arrest for carrying small amounts of the drug.

Following criticism of the decision and claims that stronger strains of cannabis were causing a health threat, Tony Blair ordered a review of the law.

But in 2006 the review rejected the argument for a return to class B status.

Mr Straw's son William was arrested in 1997 aged 15 and given a police caution for trying to sell £10 worth of cannabis to an undercover reporter.

Mr Straw was then Home Secretary and had taken a tough stance on drugs.

The shadow home secretary, David Davis, said last night: "This is yet another Cabinet minister performing a U-turn on policy pioneered over the last decade.

"Labour's lax approach to drugs, 24-hour drinking has wrought havoc, fuelling crime and anti-social behaviour at great cost to the public."

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