

Dutch look at weeding out cannabis cafés

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Coffee shops legally selling cannabis have been a feature of Amsterdam's streets for more than 30 years, both a magnet for younger tourists and a symbol of the Dutch brand of liberal exceptionalism.

But the fragrant haze found in the city's 200 or so establishments could be dispersed under plans by the incoming government, which is looking to roll back the "tolerance policy" that has allowed such coffee shops to operate since 1976.

Coinciding with a tightening of laws around prostitution – another tolerated industry – the authorities' new stance on cannabis is raising questions as to whether Dutch society is moving away from *laissez-faire* traditions, which have included some of the earliest gay-friendly policies in Europe and the provision of free contraception to teenage girls.

Certainly the outlook for coffee shops is bleak. Among the few policies that the three parties in the new coalition agree upon is the need to cut back on, if not entirely abolish, coffee shops. The governing agreement released last week laid out plans that will force them to become member-only clubs and shut down those located within 350 metres of schools.

They are also advancing the idea of prohibiting the sale of cannabis to non-Dutch residents, which amounts to a death knell for many coffee shops, particularly in Amsterdam, the Netherlands' biggest city.

"It's a head-on attack," says Gerrit Jan 10 Bloemendal, vice-chairman of the Netherlands Cannabis Platform, a lobby group opposing the proposal, and himself a coffee-shop operator.

The coffee-shop crackdown comes as part of a broader law-and-order drive promoted in particular by Geert Wilders, the anti-Islam firebrand whose far-right Freedom Party (PVV) made the biggest gains in the June elections. Though the PVV is not formally part of the incoming coalition, it helped draft parts of the legislative programme as part of a deal to support the government.

The new stance comes after years of gradual tightening of the rules governing cannabis sales and a 2007 ban on the selling of alcohol in the coffee shops. After proliferating in the 1980s and early 1990s, their number in the Netherlands has halved from a peak of 1,400 in 1995 to just over 700 today.

"For sure, if the reforms go through it will impact business," says Maciej Truszkowski, owner of the Seville coffee shop, a small, dimly lit venue just off one of Amsterdam's concentric canals. There are no displays of hemp leaves or any other sign that cannabis is for sale, in line with strict advertising rules, though multiple portraits of Bob Marley hint at Sevilla's core business.

On a quiet weekday lunchtime recently, a couple of locals walked in to the Seville and asked for a cannabis menu. But British and US university students made up the bulk of the clientele. According to Mr Truszkowski, foreigners provide half his business, a figure he thinks is much higher for coffee shops nearer the red-light district, a 10-minute walk away.

Mr Truszkowski argues that if he cannot sell cannabis to foreigners, someone else will. "Even without coffee shops, Amsterdam will be known for its cannabis. One way or another, the business will go on."

The more stringent legislative tack being embarked on echoes a tightening of rules around the sex industry and measures to halve the size of Amsterdam's red-light district.

For Paul Schnabel, director of the Social and Cultural Planning Office, a state advisory board, the move reflects a growing view that the tolerance policies have not achieved their aims of controlling the ills associated with drugs and prostitution, rather than a recasting of Dutch liberalism.

"There's a strong tendency in Dutch society to control things by allowing them. It's always been there, a pragmatic tradition, typical of a trading nation. We look for better alternatives to problems that we know exist anyway," he explains.

But, he adds, "Dutch society is less willing to tolerate than before. Perhaps 30 years ago we were a more easy-going society."

The equation that led to the policy of tolerance has changed in the past decade, as large-scale crime around both coffee shops and the legal sex trade became more visible. In particular, the absence of legal means for coffee shops to acquire the cannabis they sell has highlighted its association with organised criminality.

But the open-minded instincts that helped foster the tolerance policies in the first place have also come to be questioned. And it is not just the far-right that is opposing coffee shops. The traditional parties of power on the centre-right, the Christian Democrats and the Liberal VVD party, have also moved against the tolerance policies they once promoted.

"Definitely there has been a moralisation of the state in recent years, and that has contributed to the coalition's stance on coffee shops," says André Krouwel, a political scientist at the Free University in Amsterdam.

"The liberal consensus that helped create those policies – that's gone now. The pragmatism has been replaced by increasingly moral politics, in a way which is reminiscent of what happened in the United States with the 'moral majority' in the 1980s."

Coffee-shop owners, meanwhile, hope that local officials will continue the tolerance policies even in the face of central government pressure, or that any new law will be repealed by a more liberal government before being implemented. But at the very least, another dramatic reduction in the number of authorised outlets is seen as inevitable.

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