

D'Amato: Move to legalize pot heats up

By Luisa D'Amato



Pushing to legalize pot One man among thousands who attended the Toronto Freedom festival at Queen's Park to smoke, march, celebrate freedom and advocate to legalize marijuana on May 7, 2011. *Steve Russell, Record news services*

OTTAWA — God save the Queen and pass the joint.

When you just can't win a war, it's a good idea to consider whether you should still be in there, fighting it.

Smoking marijuana and taking other products of the cannabis plant are all illegal in this country. But many otherwise law-abiding people do it anyway, and we are now at the point where political leaders are almost embarrassed if they haven't taken a toke or two. Federal Liberal leader Bob Rae says he has smoked marijuana. So has Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty. And U.S. President Barack Obama, when asked if he had inhaled, quipped: "Frequently ... That was the point!"

It seems that everywhere, except the federal Conservative government, we're ready to shrug off our anti-dope laws. Two out of three Canadian adults want marijuana legalized, according to Toronto-based Forum Research. And the most supportive group of making it legal are the baby boomers, those 55- to 64-year-olds who might fondly remember the sweet-smelling years of the late 1960s, when peace-loving hippies ruled the popular culture of North America.

It's hard to argue with these numbers. Four in 10 Canadian adults have used marijuana at some point in their lives, according to a 2009 study reported by the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health. The centre also says that one in four Ontario students between Grade 7 and Grade 12 reported using the drug in the previous year.

Even the ultimate law-and-order people, the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police, think that it's a waste of resources to prosecute people for simple possession, and advocate decriminalizing it.

And now the Liberal party of Canada has endorsed legalizing and regulating the drug at its weekend convention. Is this a desperate appeal for attention from a party that has hit rock bottom? Or an inspired idea that could help with its rebirth?

Our own former Liberal MP for Kitchener-Waterloo, Andrew Telegdi, spoke at the convention in favour of making weed legal, and his reasons were excellent.

As long as marijuana is illegal, criminals will be the people who organize its distribution and pocket the profits, he argued.

"The war on drugs doesn't work. It has never worked," Telegdi said. "Let the police focus on other stuff."

Instead, he thinks people should be able to buy marijuana at the liquor store, where employees could check that you're an adult, and where there would also be control on what's in the product.

"Regulate it, tax it, deal with it the same way we deal with alcohol," Telegdi said.

He makes sense.

Think of the financial and social relief we as a society would enjoy if we could have taxes from marijuana sales to help pay for health care and reduce our deficits. Think, too, of all the time and money police could save if they stopped investigating, arresting and charging the tens of thousands of people a year whom they encounter. Think of the prisons we wouldn't have to build.

And think of the relief that would be felt by all those people with painful diseases for which marijuana offers a respite. Right now, medical marijuana is legal, but still a bureaucratic nightmare for many of those who have the right to use it. If the plant were legal for all, that bureaucracy would melt away like a snowman in July.

Is marijuana harmful? There's not much evidence that it is, and that's partially because it hasn't been extensively studied. But a large new United States government study has just reported that regular marijuana use, even over years, does not harm lung function.

I'm sure there are some ways in which marijuana can harm your health. But whatever they are, they're surely dwarfed by those other two demons, alcohol and tobacco, which have so deeply harmed so many of us.

None of us wants to think of our teenagers taking any drugs. But, given the reality of many teenage lives, I'd venture to say that a 16-year-old is a lot safer high than drunk. A teen who chugs vodka too fast for her body to dispose of it can pass out and die from alcohol poisoning. A teen who smokes dope is not going to die of an overdose. He'll be stumbling around the kitchen looking for a bag of Doritos.

The reality of legalized marijuana is a long way away still, I'm sure. The Harper government has always been clear that it has no interest in loosening the law. And the Liberals never took the chance to make it legal for all those years when they actually ran the country, so it's easy to see their pronouncements now as so much hot air. Still, you can sense that — to quote one 60s troubadour — the times, they are a-changin.'