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## Opinion - Hallelujah! Canadians agree it's time to legalize marijuana

By Ian Mulgrew, Vancouver Sun January 19, 2012



A new poll suggests Canada may have reached the tipping point and a 66-per-cent majority favours legalizing marijuana.

Hallelujah! Finally we might get a sensible public policy discussion in this country about what to do about a relatively benign substance that has been demonized and outlawed for a century yet is as readily available in schoolyards as cigarettes.

The prohibition and a 40-year-long "War on Drugs" have led to pot being more widely accessible, taxpayers considerably poorer, gangs richer and thousands upon thousands of otherwise law-abiding citizens branded "criminal."

Another 50,000 or so Canadians are busted every year for possession; throw in 20,000 or so traffickers and producers and this so-called war is costing us as much as \$400 million annually in law enforcement, court and corrections.

Bearing in mind a million dollars a year buys roughly 12 new cops, 14 teachers or public health nurses, ask yourself: Couldn't all that money be better spent?

The federal Liberal party obviously thinks so - 77 per cent of delegates at the weekend convention voted to legalize the herb, echoing the Senate special committee on illegal drugs (chaired by a Conservative), which 10 years ago urged the government to free the weed. Four decades ago, the LeDain Commission similarly called for an end to the criminal prohibition of cannabis.

Across the country today, more and more people agree.

Conducted Dec. 13 by Toronto-based Forum Research Inc. and released Tuesday, the latest poll of 1,160 respondents 18 or older showed that residents of B.C. were the most likely to support pot-law reform, with 73 per cent wanting change.

Quebec had the lowest support for reforms at 61 per cent.

(The interactive voice-response telephone survey has a margin of error of plus or minus 2.9 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.)

Who's leading the way? Those aged 55 to 64.

Why? Yes, there are a lot of old hippies. But of all the age cohorts, the middle-aged and elderly, the late-boomers are learning faster than most that marijuana may be the Aspirin of the 21st century.

Medicinal marijuana is changing the debate about pot across the continent.

From cancer patients fighting nausea from chemotherapy to those suffering from glaucoma, Crohn's disease and other ailments, pot brings therapeutic relief unavailable from pharmaceutical products.

Its growing and widespread use is erasing old stoner stereotypes and triggering a more grown-up adult conversation about the weed.

And money is driving it - not just the prospect of future tax revenue estimated in the billions, but fortunes are being made right now off medical marijuana.

In some U.S. states with med-pot pro-grams, big box stores have opened selling hydroponic gear, specialized equipment and supplies for growers.

The IRS says one single Oakland marijuana dispensary owes \$2.5 million in back taxes. Another generates about \$18.5 million annually in sales.

There are 16 states that have medical marijuana programs and in the three west coast states, advocates are readying tax-and-sell or other legalization programs.

Ending the criminal prohibition of marijuana does not mean making it freely available - it means regulating it as we do alcohol and tobacco, far more dangerous substances.

Portugal legalized pot and other drugs a decade ago and the sky did not fall: European drug addicts did not flock to the country nor did Spain suffer the feared nasty side effects.

This poll should spur the federal government to rethink its crime legislation and to begin a discussion about different models of legalization.

Recreational pot smoking then could be dealt with as we have battled the much more deadly use of tobacco - with public-health campaigns and education.

No one has gone to jail for taking a cigarette break or been busted for grabbing a quick puff, yet we've driven down usage and tobacco has far less cachet today.

The hipster attraction of marijuana can be similarly attacked without exposing our children to criminal prosecution and the risk of a record following them for life.

Let's treat marijuana and other drugs as a health issue rather than a crime.

It's cheaper, better for our communities and safer for kids.

It would let police focus on real criminals, ease the burden of overloaded, backlogged courts and save a fortune in expensive legal and penal costs.

Interim Liberal leader Bob Rae summed it up pretty well in his closing speech: "Let's face up to it, Canada, the war on drugs has been a complete bust."

[imulgrew@vancouver.sun.com](mailto:imulgrew@vancouver.sun.com)

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