

Pot policy: a major election issue?

At this point, it would seem to be almost inevitable that marijuana will be a major issue in next year's federal election.

Unless Canada's three major political parties change their present stance on the matter, their respective positions would seem to be miles apart.

But a closer look at the issue will lead to a conclusion that there is really precious little difference between the positions taken by Liberal leader Justin Trudeau and NDP leader Thomas Mulcair.

Mr. Trudeau got a lot of publicity (and more than a little criticism) earlier this year when he came out for legalization of marijuana. Current Liberal policy, if implemented, would see pot sales regulated and taxed like tobacco, the regulations including a prohibition of sales to minors.

Thus far, the NDP hasn't gone that far, party policy simply favouring ?decriminalization.? However, in reality, that's tantamount to legalization, since under our constitution it would be left up to each province to decide whether to ban or just regulate its production and sale.

The political debate over marijuana legalization may well intensify in the wake of recent editorials and opinion pieces here and in the United States, where a federal law passed 44 years ago banned both production and possession of the substance, but where some states have purported to legalize its recreational use.

In Canada, our current federal government, which, unlike the U.S. government, has sole responsibility for criminal law, has moved on two fronts ? increasing the penalties for both trafficking and possession of marijuana while permitting some production and sale for medical use.

This strange situation has led to a bizarre debate ? held recently in Caledon and likely to surface soon in Orangeville ? as to whether production of ?medical marijuana? should take place indoors or outside on farms.

Although the farming community would obviously favour participation in a potentially lucrative new crop, municipal politicians can be counted on to favour a hydroponic approach that means more local employment, occupation of empty former industrial sites and more property tax revenue.

Of course, that debate would end if legalization proved that the product could be produced more cheaply outdoors.

The position taken by the New York Times in an editorial last month was that the question of legalization should be left up to individual U.S. states. It concluded that the federal ban has inflicted ?great harm on society just to prohibit a substance far less dangerous than alcohol.?

Marijuana for recreational use went on sale in Colorado Jan. 1 and Washington State followed suit last month. Oregon and Alaska will vote on the matter in November.

Here, the federal Liberals argue that legalization is a ?smarter? way of dealing with the issue because it would take away the pot market from organized crime and gangs, while also ensuring a better system of addressing the effects of marijuana use on individual health and communities.

Deputy Liberal leader Ralph Goodale welcomed the Times editorial, which he termed ?serious comment with a lot of intellectual heft behind it that makes the point that the current regime of absolute prohibition doesn't work,? particularly when it came to keeping pot from youths. ?All of the profit is ending up in the hands of gangs,? he told the Ottawa Citizen, ?and society is no healthier and no safer. So surely there is room for intelligent discussion about how to do it better.? (It remains to be seen whether in an election

year that will be possible.)

It's surely ironic that among tobacco, alcohol and marijuana, the proven killer drug is also the least regulated.