

Pot in perspective: from the Old Testament to today

BY AMBER MACARTHUR

Ignoring the use of marijuana in Canada and the United States is virtually impossible. Everyone has something to say about it; for or against. Whether it is the plant's medicinal, recreational, or commercial uses, marijuana remains a heated subject.

Hemp stores are popping up everywhere; from the *Blue Moon Hemp Shop* in Charlottetown, to the forerunners of the hemp industry, *Hemp BC*, in Vancouver. Arguments for the medicinal use of hemp and marijuana are the strongest they have been in years. Marijuana as medicine is increasingly prescribed by doctors to ease the pain of patients with advanced cases of cancer and AIDS.

But what about marijuana for recreational use? The arguments are not scientifically based, but one cannot deny that marijuana has become the social drug of choice, for all kinds, and its history in Canada and the United States is interesting, to say the least.

Bill Clinton's admission to smoking marijuana, despite insisting, "I didn't inhale", is one of the most memorable images of the nineties (it also gave us an understanding for his love of the Big Mac).

Halifax's own Alexa McDonough followed in his footsteps admitting, in front of a MuchMusic audience, to dabbling with marijuana.

"I tried it once, but I've never smoked a cigarette and I didn't know how to do it," she said.

Also, long-time Liberal MP, Sheila Copps, has admitted to the odd toké during her youth.

Whether or not the President of the United States and the National Leader of the NDP repeatedly mix politics and pot is a story on its own. But, for the time being, what these admissions do for the history of marijuana is provide insight into the widespread use of the drug among all social classes. It also helps marijuana advocates remove some of the prejudices surrounding pot, while at the same time providing historical references to the drug which are thousands of years old.

Marijuana advocates look to history to support their claims that the drug should be legalized, for whatever reasons, so that it ceases to exist under

such extreme public scrutiny. Perhaps the most interesting reference is to the Old Testament. Although uniting religion and marijuana is a sensitive issue, the references do exist.

In a three-part series entitled "Smoke gets in my I" in the magazine *Cannabis Canada*, contributor Chris Bennet goes to great lengths to prove that the use of marijuana in the Old Testament exists. Bennet argues, "this article shows how the Old Testament Prophets were none other than ancient shamans, and that cannabis and other entheogens played a very prominent role in ancient Hebrew culture." Insinuating that Moses and other Biblical prophets sat around and smoked pot is bound to stir up emotions, whether pro-pot or not. Luckily for those people who are pro-

pot, there are references that do not touch on such sacred texts.

In the early 17th century, marijuana was grown here in Nova Scotia by Louis Hebert, who had emigrated here with his family from France. Although most of the historical references during this time link the plant to use as hemp and medicine, one can enjoy the image of some bored Nova Scotians, and others across Canada and the United States, discovering the true beauty of the crop. Throughout this time period there is no concrete evidence that marijuana is considered a threat to society; it was not until the early 1900s that the marijuana became a "drug problem".

In the late 1920s opium paved the way for the marijuana movement. *continued on page 22...*

The politics of truth: legalization in Canada

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the government chose to waste tax dollars on revolves around Chris Clay.

Clay, the former owner of London Ontario's Hemp Nation (a cannabis culture store specializing in paraphernalia, hemp clothing and seed distribution), was arrested on May 17, 1995 for selling marijuana seeds and one seedling to an undercover cop.

But when most would be scared, Clay welcomed the charge. He initially opened the store to "educate people and fund political activities to change the law".

Clay hired Osgoode Hall Law Professor Alan Young to plead his case in Ontario's Provincial Court. Young is no stranger to drug laws. He has appeared in federal court many times, including arguing that federal laws banning drug literature violated freedom

of expression. Thanks to him, that law was struck down.

Young's argument cited Section 7 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms which "...protects individuals' right to life, liberty, and the security of the person." He contended that the government cannot pass laws that are arbitrary and capricious.

"The law is over-broad here. Parliament has never heard documented proof that marijuana is harmful enough to merit [banning]."

Young also argued that marijuana crosses no "recognizable threshold of harm" in the user. When comparing pot to a legal drug such as tobacco, Young's statement is easier to comprehend.

The tar content in an average marijuana joint could be as harmful to the heart as five or more tobacco cigarettes. The average user of pot smokes about 3-5 joints per week, while

a smoker puffs on an average of 200 cigarettes.

Justice John McCart, in his ruling over the case presented, felt Young, with his army of specialist witnesses, had argued his case well.

In his 27 page report, McCart recognized:

- Consumption in so called "decriminalized" states does not increase in proportion to states where there is no decriminalization.

- Marijuana does not make people more violent or aggressive.

- Health related costs of cannabis use are negligible when compared to the cost attributable to alcohol and tobacco consumption.

- Marijuana is not criminogenic in that there is no evidence of a relationship of cannabis use and criminality.

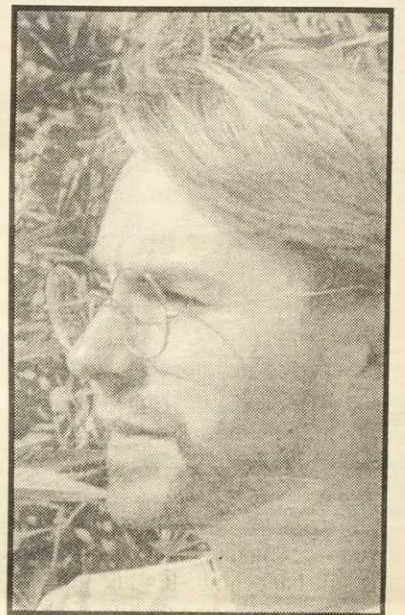
- Consumption of marijuana is relatively harmless compared to the so called hard drugs and including alcohol and tobacco.

However, this wasn't enough to convince McCart that Clay was innocent. He ruled against him, saying that marijuana law reform should take place in parliament, not the courts.

Young is taking his arguments to the Court of Appeals, and should be heard sometime this spring.

In an article published in *Cannabis Canada*, Clay responded to the ruling against him.

"Parliament doesn't have to demonstrate a behaviour is harmful in order to criminalize the conduct." But also acknowledged that "the consumption of marijuana does cause harm, albeit perhaps not as much harm as was first believed."



Chris Clay: the former hemp shop owner has become a martyr for the pro-pot movement.

Consequences

Possession of marijuana under 30 grams: maximum of \$1000 fine or a six month jail sentence.

Possession of marijuana over 30 grams but not exceeding 3 kilograms: Trafficking. Maximum 5-year less a day sentence.

Some changes to marijuana laws
Under the new Controlled Drugs and Substances Act:

- a person guilty of simple possession will not be finger-printed, nor will their name be on any criminal databases.
- police officers have more power to seize property of suspected cultivators.
- people accused of trafficking may experience a new "streamlined" justice system: no preliminary hearing and no trial by jury.

In an official written statement, the Canadian Bar Association says it opposes the new law:

"The prohibition approach is outdated and has proven ineffective in decreasing drug use, reducing crime, or improving public or individual health. The Controlled Drugs and Substances Act will result in a significant increase in rates of incarceration and in lengths of sentences, and will place additional stresses on an already overburdened criminal justice system. It will not contribute to public health but will accomplish exactly the opposite. The Controlled Drug and Substances Act represents a misguided approach to drug control, one that is unnecessary and costly to Canadians." — Canadian Bar Association

Pot's medicinal myths

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higher than regular cigarettes. Depending upon the kind of cannabis you use whether it's marijuana, hash or hash oil you can get one use equal to an entire pack of cigarettes in terms of tar content, and they don't put a filter on that.

"If you're using hash, hash is marijuana that's mixed usually with used engine oil, so you've got petroleum products as well that the person is breathing in."

In addition to wreaking havoc on the user's lungs and affecting memory and perception in the brain, Tobin adds that much damage can be done to the user's reproductive organs.

"The testosterone level is down in regular users and may be permanently effected. Their testicles shrink and they may lose hair."

Tobin adds that it may be even more dangerous in women because THC is stored around the ovaries and women do not replace their eggs like men replace sperm.

Although these tests have not been conducted on humans, Tobin adds, "In animals, high doses of marijuana have caused an increase in still-births, miscarriages, hyperactivity, and learning and mental health problems in children."

Tobin and Lewis both downplay the benefits of using marijuana in palliative care, the final stages of AIDS and glaucoma.

"So far there are other drugs that work better in terms of cannabis in treating some of those problems," says Tobin.

"I'm not saying that it can't help with these problems, but what you have to do is weigh the pros and cons. It lowers white blood cell count, so you take someone [for example] who has Aids... it can be effective in the final stages, but the last thing you want to do is have somebody, whose T-cells you are trying to keep up, take a drug that will lower their white-blood cell counts."

Lewis agrees.

"They say it's good for pain, well other things are good for pain too. They can cause as many problems, but I know what Demoral is and I know what effect it will have on you, but I don't know what effect cannabis will have on you because it's not the same for all people," Lewis said.

Tobin adds that nabolone, a drug used in Canada that is a derivative of cannabis, is available on a very controlled and limited basis for some conditions. But both Tobin and Lewis both fear that marijuana would become like alcohol if it were legalized.

"Alcohol is our number one drug problem not only in Canada, but the world, and legalization of a drug doesn't lesson the dangers or the effects. Legalization of the drug does not mean that it is now safe," Lewis said.

"You can do one joint and it can

take anywhere from one to three weeks for all of that THC to get out of the body. Somebody says they're only doing it on the weekends, they're never drug free. It's not like having a drink on Saturday night and it's gone by Monday morning," Tobin added.

Tobin believes that marijuana should not be legalized, and that decriminalization should only be considered with caution.

"The positive effects of the drug are so few that it should be controlled. There is limited medical use, but I don't believe in having marijuana shops. I have real concerns about legalization and once you go there it's hard to go back. You look at the issue of smoking. Now they have the tobacco control act. It's so hard to go back and people have to be really careful."

Tobin believes if marijuana was legalized, it would increase the amount of use and increase the problem.

"Studies were done when cannabis was a different drug. Studies now are saying there are real issues, big issues and big concerns, but the media tends to cover stuff like marches for legalization and people get the sensational rather than the full medical story. Kids read it right away, get that information, look for that information and use it to justify using."

Pot health issues

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to eight hours," he said. "[Smoking marijuana] is more controlled, more beneficial."

Though Hodder is confident that Canada will eventually legalize the use of marijuana for medical purposes, he feels this cannot happen until politicians and Canadians in general begin to look at the issue in terms of the medical benefits.

"I think politicians are dealing with the issue not as a medical issue as it should be, but as a legal issue. The medical use of marijuana has been around for a very long time. Unfortunately in our country, it has been confused with the illegal use."

"As long as it's tied up in this legal crap, we're not going to get very far."

As patients fight it out with politicians, Canadian physicians are being caught in the middle. They want to (and are morally obligated to) do whatever they can to help their patients. But the use of marijuana, regardless of whether it is beneficial, is still illegal in Canada.

"Many doctors will not publicly say they support it—they must toe the party line," said Hodder. "I know doctors who will tell their patients 'All I can suggest is to get a toké'."

One Halifax doctor who asked not to be named would only say, "If somebody thought [marijuana] would help them and they were dying of cancer — I wouldn't be opposed to it."