

Here at the comment section of the National Post, Dear Editor likes his opinion writers to keep an open mind on all subjects. He sees the ability to change one's opinion when the evidence indicates it's the right thing to do as a mark of intellectual maturity. So I am likely going to get a gold star this week, because I used to think that marijuana should be decriminalized but not legalized, and now I think it should be legalized as well.

I haven't changed my opinion that marijuana is, for many weak-willed individuals, a gateway to harder drugs. Nor do I think it is as harmless as pot pushers like to make it out to be. Heavy usage is especially dangerous to the still-developing teenage brain, and has been linked to mental illness. According to the chief of the U.K. Medical Research Council, "The link between cannabis and psychosis is quite clear now; it wasn't 10 years ago."

Even though it doesn't lead to fatal overdoses, the stuff most people are smoking is about five times more potent than it used to be, and addiction is common. Indeed, the difficulty many users find in quitting is alarming enough that psychologists and psychiatrists are debating amongst themselves whether "Cannabis Withdrawal Syndrome" should find its way into the next edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders.

But the fairness argument is too compelling to continue to ignore. Tobacco is harmful in any amount and it remains perfectly legal. Alcohol, while benign in reasonable quantities, is a gateway to alcoholism — the most intractable and damaging of addictions — which causes far more domestic and social misery than marijuana possibly could. And finally, there comes a certain tipping point when resisting the common will for no easily defined reason stops making social or economic sense.

Two thirds of Canadians want marijuana to be decriminalized. It seems clear to me that sooner or later marijuana is going to join alcohol and tobacco as a substance that the government recognizes cannot be eradicated.

Unless the moral argument is too powerful to override — in this case it isn't — economic realities can't be ignored. The value of the cannabis industry in British Columbia is worth an estimated \$30-billion a year; it would be worth double or triple that amount if it could legally attract tourists from the U.S. and other countries. Enforcement of our present laws is said to cost \$1-billion a year; that money could be put to better use by rehabilitating hard drug addicts. The federal government brings in about \$5-billion annually in tobacco taxes; legalizing marijuana would bring in at least a billion or two more.

(One novel argument for normalizing marijuana, is made by Peter Beckl, in his article on RxDirect2u.com, which sings the praises of growing hemp over wood. According to Beckl, an acre of hemp produces the same amount of cellulose fibre as more than four acres of trees. Hemp grows back in four months, not twenty years, and so produces paper at a quarter the cost of wood pulp with a fraction of the pollution. This makes a lot of sense.)

I'd like to see marijuana legalized, but highly regulated. The government should oversee its growth, its potency and its distribution. It should be heavily taxed, as all recreational substances that can be abused are. But I'm not naive. Because it wouldn't be legally available to minors, and because the strength would be too muted for many potheads, a black market in more potent stuff would spring up immediately. Criminals will focus their efforts on marketing stronger, illegal marijuana to minors. And we shouldn't be surprised if our First Nations suddenly discover that growing and selling pot are ancient traditions in their culture that exempt them from paying sales taxes.

Legalization will no doubt come with its own set of problems. Commercialization and widespread marketing will bring in masses of new users. And, as I've argued before, for accountability and liability purposes, legalization will embroil government, insurance companies, schools and the medicare system in such a tortuous maze of regulatory and enforcement interference with their privacy, that potheads — and the libertarians who see legalization as a liberating panacea — will yearn for the paradoxical simplicity of illegal, but unencumbered access.

Still, the present situation is ethically and politically untenable. Legalization is preferable to the costly, ineffective and unjustifiable demonization of a substance that is no worse — and in many ways more benign — than other permitted substances.

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