

Sunday September 15, 2013

Applying some sense to pot possession

By Jim Taylor

I admit it – I have never smoked marijuana. Nope, never! U.S. border guards will have to find some other excuse for stopping me from entering their country.

In case you hadn't heard, university student Jessica Goldstein of White Rock was recently barred from entering the U.S. because she admitted smoking marijuana.

Victoria resident Myles Wilkinson was similarly refused entry because of a marijuana possession conviction 32 years before, when he was 19.

Goldstein says she has "no criminal record, no charges whatsoever."

But she admitted doing something still considered a crime in the U.S. – even though it's no longer a crime in the state she was entering. Last year, both Washington and Colorado de-criminalized possession of pot.

As it happens, Justin Trudeau, leader of the federal Liberal party, has also admitted smoking marijuana in the past. So have eight other prominent Canadian politicians. They're hardly exceptional – a 2011 Health Canada survey found that at least 40 per cent of Canadians over the age of 15 have smoked pot at some time.

It makes me wonder – just supposin', if the Liberal party became the government again, could an overly zealous immigration official prevent the prime minister of Canada from going to the White House to confer with the president?

And what if the president himself is equally guilty? So far, three presidents – Obama, Clinton, and Bush – have made that admission.

Lobby for change

Here in LotusLand, SensibleBC has launched a petition about de-criminalizing personal use of marijuana. To succeed, they must sign up at least 10 per cent of eligible voters in every one of B.C.'s 85 electoral ridings, in just 90 days.

But even getting 400,000 signatures merely requires the government to hold a referendum. It doesn't determine either the results of such a referendum, or the government's ultimate response.

De-criminalization doesn't endorse pot smoking. Nor does it invite wide-open marketing, promotion, and selling of marijuana. It means only that if you're caught with pot, you don't get a criminal conviction – which could, under present laws, restrict your opportunities for employment, obtaining a loan or mortgage, working with young people in volunteer organizations, or seeking political office.

At this time, SensibleBC is asking only for de-criminalization.

Personally, I would prefer to see full legalization of marijuana. Granted, B.C. cannot alter the federal Criminal Code, regardless of what a referendum declares. Only the federal government could legalize possession and sale of marijuana.

But B.C. can instruct the RCMP and municipal police forces that courts will not consider criminal charges against those caught merely smoking marijuana. In fact, 90 per cent of arrests for marijuana possession never make it to court already – making current enforcement efforts a colossal waste of policing time and effort.

Analyzing the figures

Admittedly, marijuana can have harmful effects. But far less so, according to a study by Gerald Thomas, an analyst with the Centre for Addictions Research of B.C., and Chris Davis, an analyst with the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse, than tobacco and alcohol.

Analyzing Health Canada data, Thomas and Davis concluded that the health and social costs for tobacco smokers exceeded \$800 per user; for alcohol, \$165; for cannabis, just \$20.

Enforcement costs for tobacco are minimal. But they add \$153 per drinker and \$328 per cannabis user.

“In other words,” commented author Ken McQueen in *Maclean's*, “94 per cent of the cost to society of cannabis comes from keeping it illegal.”

The costs of enforcing criminalization, agreed a 2002 Canadian Senate report, “are disproportionately high.”

In the U.S., the Drug Enforcement Agency calculates the cost of every drug-related arrest at \$9,893. Over a 35-year period, the DEA spent more than \$536 billion in a war against – mostly – marijuana.

Like the Wall Street money merchants and the American auto industry, the DEA has become too big to fail.

Flawed reasoning

I do not buy its argument that marijuana is a gateway drug that leads users to harder drugs.

First, because the real gateway drugs are alcohol and tobacco – both of which are legal. Over and over, studies show that hard drug users started with cigarettes and beer before experimenting with substances that had stronger effects.

Second, because it assumes an inevitable progression towards more dangerous activities. That’s nonsense. The fact that most serial killers were cruel to animals as children does not mean that all small boys will become mass murderers. Buying a raffle ticket does not necessarily start a long slide into gambling addiction.

We don’t prohibit alcohol any more. We never have prohibited tobacco. Instead we control them, thus eliminating a market that booze and butt dealers could exploit.

We should do the same for pot.

De-criminalization of marijuana may not be the final answer, but it makes a lot more sense than the system we have now.

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YOUR TURN

The world situation has been changing rapidly since I wrote last Sunday’s column about Bashar al-Assad and chemical weapons. So some of the comments about that column are already out of date. Nevertheless, here they are.

Wayne Rains wrote, “The specter of chemical weapons brings back all those repugnant images of the ‘trenches’ and the barbarity and slaughter of the First World War. As a baby boomer, of Canadian origin, I give thanks to the heavens every day for the sacrifices of our ancestors who set the stage for our Canadian heritage and society, and most importantly, a free and peaceful nation.

“With regard to those chemical weapons, I just don’t foresee any solution to be gained by lobbing a few Tomahawk missiles at Assad and his crew. (I think the only reason those missiles haven’t already been launched, is

because the US hasn't accumulated the intelligence to pinpoint targets.) Assuming that they do fire some missiles and 'take out' Assad, you and I know that the strike won't likely lead to a solution to the conflict.

Isabel Gibson had similar thoughts: "There are some problems that do not admit of military solutions, even though they seem to cry out for military action. I suspect that Syria is one of them.

"Before 'launching' we must ask a few hard questions. What are our objectives, and how will we know when we've achieved them? Do we have the resources and will power to do what it takes to achieve our objectives? If we stop short, what are the odds that we will have done more harm than good? I suspect that the military option to reduce Bashar al-Assad's ability and willingness to use chemical weapons (a good objective, I believe) would require putting American troops into Syria. I think we know how that would work out.

"And it seems that we have no other options - no economic or diplomatic leverage with him or his big-power buddies, or none that we are prepared to use."

Cliff Boldt drew attention to those who profited from the sale of chemical weapons: "And the source of those chemical weapons Saddam used? The USA."

Tom Isherwood challenged my thesis. "Jim Taylor's column had me shaking my head in the part that claimed 'in a democracy the people can vote someone out -- and perhaps more importantly, the person voted out accepts the people's decision'. Hogwash! Premier Christy Clark was voted out the democratic way, but well you know about the second chance! ... How about recalls, Jim? How many parliamentarians can you inform me have actually been recalled?"

Sorry, Tom, I think you missed the point. I wasn't writing about recalls. That's a different matter entirely. But I can think of hundreds of parliamentarians, probably thousands within my lifetime, who did not get re-elected. They accepted the voters' decision; they did not attempt to retain their positions by power. That's what makes this still a democracy. Democracy does not mean that voters can remove their representatives any time they choose -- that's just as totalitarian as a dictatorship, but with a different group flexing its muscles. Democracy means that when there's an election, the people who lose accept that decision and step down.

Laurina Tallman found something new to think about: "Your metaphor of the tribal response is fascinating. Politicians usually speak to the lowest common denominator these days and 'tribal' is about as basic as one can get. I will be on the lookout for those analogies."

In case you're doing any more research on Middle Eastern culture, anthropologists tend to use the term "dyadic" rather than "tribal," as I did.

Steve Roney singled out my reference to the absence of a common "code of honour."

"You have this backwards," he wrote. "If such a code of honour exists, there is no need for any US action. If it does not exist, or cannot be counted on, one needs fear of punishment as a substitute. Hence the argument that Assad must be punished."

Steve also questioned my usage of "tribal" to describe a culture: "I grant you that many tribal cultures are extremely xenophobic, even viewing outsiders as less than human. I suspect that has less to do with being tribal per se than with remaining tribal when the rest of the world has moved to the more complex organization of the nation-state. That is, it is not about being tribal, but about resisting change and the unfamiliar. Foreigners are one instance of that. More complex forms of social organization are another."

My friend Sam Strauss took a pessimistic perspective: "Well composed: succinct and simple enough for anyone to understand. I couldn't agree with you more. The situation reeks of the beginnings of World Wars One and Two when chest thumping led to catastrophe."

TECHNICAL STUFF

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For other sources worth pursuing, try

- Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.traditionaliconoclast.com
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.
