

JHS Canada

Canadian Cannabis Policy

Factsheet 1

August 2002

Historical Context

- Canada was one of the first countries in the world to prohibit the possession of cannabis (1923).
- The listing of cannabis as a prohibited substance is still a "historical mystery" as there was no discussion in Parliament when it was added.
- No person was charged with cannabis possession in Canada until 1937.
- Between 1937 and 1969, 3122 persons were charged with possession of cannabis.
- Between 1970 and 2000, approximately 1.3 million charges were laid for cannabis possession.
- In the early 1980's, Canada had the highest drug arrest rate in the world due mostly to strict enforcement of laws against cannabis users.
- In 1972, the Le Dain Royal Commission extensively studied the non-medical use of drugs in Canada and unanimously recommended the decriminalization of cannabis based on public health and social cost/benefit analyses.

Current Situation

- One half of all drug related offenses in Canada are for simple cannabis possession.
- Approximately 30,000 Canadian citizens are charged with simple possession each year.
- 1.5 million Canadian citizens now have criminal records for possession of cannabis.
- No evidence has been found implicating cannabis as a gateway drug.
- 90% of users use cannabis infrequently.
- The federal government spends \$450M a year enforcing drug laws.
- The Senate Special Committee on Illegal Drugs issued a discussion paper in May that appears to support the decriminalization of cannabis.
- The ruling Liberal Government used a "poison pill" amendment to kill a potentially successful cannabis decriminalization bill in the Spring of 2002.

Policy Options

- *Status Quo*: Leave current prohibitionist policies in place.
- *De Facto Decriminalization*: Instruct the Crown to stop prosecuting cases of simple cannabis possession.
- *Decriminalization*: Remove cannabis possession from the Controlled Substances and Drugs Act and place under the Contraventions Act as a minor "ticketable" offense.
- *Controlled Legalization*: Legalize production and consumption with strict controls and high taxes like alcohol and tobacco.