

## Ideas and Opinions - Marijuana - another perspective

### Bad laws

Any law that nobody respects, because it is ridiculous, and the general population knows this, is a useless law, which probably does more harm than good.

Let me give you an example: There is an old road sign on the approach to Belize City, on the middle 'island' dividing the road entering and leaving the city. It reads - 'Trucks & buses, 15 mph; all other vehicles 25 mph.' It is so ridiculous in this day and age that nobody, absolutely nobody, neither police nor preacher nor politician, pays any mind to that sign. As a result, traffic has often been far too fast, and there have even been fatalities.

An idiot would say, then we need to enforce the law. Such a trend of thought is not what makes for human progress. Such is the idiocy of those who insist that marijuana should remain illegal, and the law just needs to be enforced.

There is a very good reason why bad laws need to be changed. 'Common law' reflects the customs and accepted behavior of a people; when, with changing times, it no longer does, then the law needs to be changed.

Bad laws make lawbreakers out of otherwise good people, who would much prefer to be completely law-abiding. What we have right now is a whole nation of lawbreakers, every day that we drive on the Northern Highway into and out of Belize City. Since we are all lawbreakers, some feel the urge to go extremely fast, recklessly so, and dangerously so, knowing that they are 'in the same boat' with the preacher, the policeman and the politician - lawbreakers all.

But if the bad traffic law was changed, and the speed limit was set more realistically, and achievably, at, say 'Trucks & buses 30 mph, all other vehicles 40 mph' in that area, it is reasonable to expect that drivers would all pay more attention to their speedometer, and try to stay within the law. In other words, increasing the speed limit would not necessarily lead to an increase of speed on that stretch of highway: it would more likely reduce it. For sure, it would make the law-abiders suddenly become the vast majority, and those who break the law for speeding would be more exposed to criticism and, perhaps, prosecution. Presently, we're all breaking the speed limit daily, and nobody is being ticketed or prosecuted.

### Marijuana

Just like I disgust a raging speedster who insists on flying past me at breakneck speed into town, I also find distasteful the behavior of some young weed smokers that I have had the occasion, over the years, to observe close up. Like a kid with a brand new toy, some youths really go overboard, and want to smoke so many times a day, morning, noon, and night, that it seems that's all they want to do. And some of them who indulge, begin to show signs of bad memory, and other bad tendencies. They are a small minority, of course, and the present law does not seem to be any deterrent to their behavior. I think the science nowadays is saying that the young developing brain should not be exposed to so many chemicals, whether it is marijuana, tobacco or alcohol.

### Alcohol

Alcohol is legal for those over 18 years of age. And it is a tradition in some parts for an elder relative to assist a young man by supervising his 'first taste' of manhood. Alcohol is a confirmed killer of brain cells, and does a lot of other damage; but many of us like it for recreation, and it is legal for those 18 years and older. But many an 'adult' has become violent 'under the influence,' and there have been any number of homicides from liquor-induced violence or driving 'under the influence.' Is the alcohol law bad? Should the bar be raised to 21 years, or more? Is there any attempt to enforce the present alcohol law?

Would those who are convinced that society would be better off without using alcoholic drinks be willing to propose a law making alcohol consumption illegal? It was tried already, by the way, in America's 'Prohibition' era; and it didn't work, unless you consider the spawning of organized crime and the explosive growth of the Mafia as 'working.' The vast majority of people considered it a bad law, and it was therefore impossible to enforce. So, it was finally revoked.

Perhaps the present alcohol law is okay; there just needs to be more effort at enforcement. For sure, the vast majority of adults are law-abiding where alcohol use is concerned. Ask yourself, when last have you been guilty of breaking the law governing the consumption or sale of alcohol. Still, the few 'who can't handle it' account for a large number of alcohol-related crimes, by fighting or by causing vehicle accidents. We all should have a hand in curbing the loss of life from alcohol abuse, by counseling and advising, and asserting ourselves where necessary, to ensure that things don't get out of hand when we see one of our brethren getting 'tipsy.' Alcohol is also proven to be chemically addictive, and bad for our health. It is nevertheless legal, but controlled and regulated by laws and taxes.

### Back to marijuana

Marijuana is illegal in Belize, point blank. It makes me feel stupid (don't you also?), and helpless, just to say it. Young or old, for pain or pleasure, whoever smokes weed is a lawbreaker. Can an old, wise man who smokes weed now and then, tell a young man to slow down or stop smoking weed? The present law puts them both in the same bag - lawbreakers all. Has the present law served to control or stop the use of marijuana among young people, with tender, developing brains? How will a youth respect the words of an elder, when the system, meaning the present marijuana law, puts them both on equal footing as lawbreakers?

### A bad law

As sweeping as it is, making a large portion of the population into lawbreakers, because they simply will not, and refuse to, accept it as a sensible and just law, the present marijuana law is as useless as the speed limit sign that says we should drive under 25 miles per hour. But if the law was more realistic, respecting adult use of marijuana, as it does for alcohol, and restricting the legal serving of the drug to under age youth, it would give immediate status to adult users, who would no longer be categorized as lawbreakers; and they would be in a better position to assert themselves over the youth inclined to indulge in the practice.

Any law that the vast majority of any population regards as stupid and impractical, will inevitably serve to undermine the maintenance of law and order, because people will instinctively rebel against a stupid law whenever they can get away with it. But what the present law does is effectively brand a large portion of the population as lawbreakers.

### Criminalizing good people

A green plant began to grow at my front door, and I had the urge to just let it grow. Under this present law, a police officer comes to my front door and charges me for breaking the law. What if I planned to boil or soak the leaves of this plant to help with my arthritis? What if I got the urge to dry some of it and smoke a little bit on a Saturday night? I am a grandfather, but under this present law the police would be doing their job to push me into the back of their pickup truck along with teenaged boys caught smoking weed.

I say, the reason why the vast majority of our population would like the present marijuana law changed, is because the law is considered stupid, impractical, and indeed a crime against members of the adult population whose right of free choice is severely infringed. Children are children, and to be protected against themselves for their own good; adults cannot help to control the youth if they themselves are being treated as lawbreakers. Contrary to the myopic fears of the religious lobby, a selective law, giving adults their right to choose, would lead to more, not less control of marijuana use among the youth population. The bottom line is that, children are NOT equal to adults.

The law should reflect the reality of the national consciousness. There have been magistrates sitting on the bench who were regular marijuana users; and many police officers and military men also. Youth in primary school and secondary school, under the age of 18 years, should not be messing around with drugs that can affect their brain development, whether it is alcohol, marijuana, or whatever drug. Drugs are for sick people, or adults who feel sick, or sick and tired of a pressing situation, and choose to use it for their own devices, be it for health, relaxation or recreation.

If some concerned adults are worried about the effect of the marijuana law on children, they should reflect on the effectiveness of the present law.

A proposed law should make it an offence for any adult to sell or otherwise encourage or facilitate the use of marijuana by any youth under the age of 18 years, same as with alcohol. With their new status of respect, adults will more likely assert themselves in helping to control the youth. Continue to regard adult users as lawbreakers, and you can hardly expect them to be effective in controlling the youth. With this new law, the adults would be on the side of the police officers, wielding authority over the youth, and thus helping to keep them in line.

### Age restriction more important than amount of grams

For the above reasons, I think it is more important to differentiate the ages when marijuana use is legal, than the amount that any individual could legally have in his possession. In effect, this approach would be actually legalizing it for adults, while keeping it illegal for minors.

Of course, like with tobacco, the law would have to restrict the smoking of marijuana in public places where others could be affected against their wishes, or on the job, where, like alcohol, one's judgement could be affected.

### Get real and stop the hypocrisy

If the naysayers will have their way in keeping the law as is, then I would propose, as ridiculous as it may sound to them, that tobacco and alcohol be also made illegal. Their health damaging and even lethal effects have been long documented. I have lost more than one childhood friend in their early middle age due to tobacco-related cancer. And I just recently lost a friend due to an alcohol-related accident.

Keeping the present marijuana law for the declared noble objective of protecting our youth, is lamentably resigning ourselves to continue living in the failed past, for fear of becoming our own architects of the future for our youth.

P.S. The records are not presently retrievable, but my memory tells me that, in the drug testing program implemented a few years ago at a company in Ladyville, it was most surprising to find that some of the best performing workers, including a couple supervisors, turned up positive for marijuana. It was not used on the job; but the urine test showed recreational use anytime within a two-week span. It was all confidential, and the drug policy allowed employees a chance for a second test two weeks later to get 'clean'. One model workshop employee who surprisingly tested positive, confided to yours truly that his work was extremely stressful, and each morning before going to work, he would take a smoke.

Alcohol was the biggest problem, especially on Monday mornings, when some employees would not report to work because they were in police lock-up due to fights on Saturday night, under the influence of alcohol; or they appeared at the gate 'stink-a-rum' and staggering, and would have to be sent back home.

I Hope these thoughts and observations add some useful fuel to the discussion in favor of changing the marijuana law.