

Rippin' up marijuana laws



CAPTION: Matt Riley at the 420 Rally in Melbourne

PHOTOGRAPHER: SAM WONG

BY JOANNE KOH

Imagine buying marijuana in the same way you can buy a coke. That's what New Zealanders have been doing at the Dakory Club, the headquarters for the National Organisation for the Reform of Marijuana Laws (NORML) and a cannabis club in Auckland. Until the weed vending machine was seized by police a few weeks ago, club members could buy 1g of marijuana by just pushing a few buttons and feeding in \$20.

Some had hoped that the Dakory Club's easy-to-use vending machine might be a positive reform in the long but failed war on drugs in New Zealand and Australia.

Matt Riley is a former representative of the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana laws in Victoria and a current member of the HEMP Party. He had long advocated for the abolishment of marijuana laws. He has organised rallies, spoken at public meetings throughout Australia and actively promotes his various Facebook groups all in a bid to: 'bring truth to the people'.

To Riley, the truth is simple: "The prohibition of drugs is 100 percent political. 100 percent. No other reasons to it."

Riley believes the health risks

the government claims to associate with marijuana use affects only a small percentage of users, and that most of other negative claims are actually false.

He heaves a familiar sigh before explaining that he can go on for days on why marijuana should be legalized.

"Legalising (marijuana) might send the wrong message .."

**Peter Norden,
Lecturer at RMIT University**

And that all the medical evidence, statistics and information that people could ever want is abundant online.

But his passion on the subject is obvious, as he interrupts during our interview: "I noticed you say 'marijuana' a lot, it's incorrect. It should be 'cannabis'."

Marijuana was the name given to cannabis during the time America made it illegal. Riley says the purpose was to give it a Mexican sounding name to cast it under a negative light.

"Cannabis is one of the top natural resources with well over 50,000 different products which it is used to make. The government banned

cannabis so that money can be generated from other materials. Banning cannabis is really about money, so completely political. Cannabis should be legalized," he said.

Professor Peter Norden, of RMIT University's Global Studies and Social Science department, is in favour of the legalization of marijuana but offers another viewpoint.

"The current criminalisation of the use and distribution of cannabis brings a large number of Australians under the focus on the criminal law in an area where there is extensive use. Decriminalising would limit this exposure," he said.

Professor Norden says it is critically important not to expose young Australians to the criminal justice system because such exposure usually leads to a deeper involvement and engagement with criminal behaviour.

"One concern that some share in the community is that decriminalisation or legalising might send the wrong message in terms of encouraging more extensive drug use. Others suggest that the medical evidence on the harmful effects are insignificant in terms of alcohol excessive use," he said.

On the scale of harmful substances, on its own, marijuana can't kill, but tobacco and alcohol account for some 12 per cent of global deaths.

Former lawyer and Professor Ian Leader-Elliott of The University of Adelaide's Law Department

agrees that decriminalisation of marijuana is a good move for Australia, but affirms that legalizing anything that is currently illegal is never a clean, rational process.

"It always requires bullsh-t and subterfuge. For example, cannabis might be semi-legalised by the pretence that it has some unique medicinal qualities, so that it can be made available by medical prescription," he said.

"Over time, the number of probably bogus medicinal uses could be expected to expand. Just like, for example, alcoholic beverages were supplied on medical prescription in the US, during prohibition."

Professor Leader-Elliott's comments falls in line with the truth about marijuana that Riley believes is lost in the smoke of political rhetoric.

Professor Steve Allsop from the National Drug Research Institute disagrees that marijuana should be legalised. He said the legal status of drugs has an impact on people's reactions, and legalising marijuana can lead to more problems.

"If marijuana is legalised, there's a risk of widespread usage. People who have not used it before might be curious and take advantage of it. So from the public health's perspective, it's not really a good idea," he said.

Professor Allsop also said that a public health response is needed should marijuana be legalised, but believes that marijuana should be prohibited with civil penalties.

"Smoking can lead to respiratory health problems as well as other conditions like anxiety, depression and psychotic episodes. So if marijuana is legalised, the amount of people using it might increase so there's the risk of an increase in these problems in society," he said.

Professor Leader-Elliott believes that there is indeed a risk but said there are ways to combat that.

"Perhaps sudden radical change can cause social disrupt and disorder. The medical prescription route has the advantage that it slows the process of change, to allow people to get used to the fact that change is happening," he said.

Maybe the marijuana vending machine wasn't a bad idea afterall.

Marijuana Laws: Fast Facts

- It is illegal to use, possess, grow or sell cannabis in Australia.
- Up to 2 cautions will be given to offenders caught with 50 grams of cannabis in Victoria. Offenders will also be asked to attend a voluntary cannabis education program.
- In other states offenders may be charged with a criminal offence and receive a much larger fine, or even be sentenced to jail.