

Marijuana Party brings legalization to the election

by Mark Cohen (CUP)

The Marijuana Party is making a bid to be Canada's next majority government in the upcoming federal election.

As the name of the party implies, it's focused only on one electoral issue - the legalization and decriminalization of marijuana. Party leader Marc-Boris Saint-Maurice has hinged his party solely on this issue

because like it or not, he believes pot is here to stay.

"The cornerstone of the issue is essentially the decriminalization of marijuana in its entirety. We're not just fighting for medical marijuana, but rather nibbling at the very heart of the problem."

The heart of the problem, as Saint-Maurice explains it, is that mari-

juana remains illegal.

The party is fighting to guarantee that Canadians who are ill have legal access to medical marijuana.

"Red wine has been shown to help against heart attacks, yet you don't see Health Canada

issuing red wine licenses," Saint-Maurice said. "We feel marijuana has the same medicinal qualities and therefore should be decriminalized."

Currently, under the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act and the related Narcotic Control Regulations, Minister of Health Allan Rock has the power to exempt medical

marijuana users and providers from persecution. He also deems who in Canada has the right to use marijuana for medicinal purposes.

Rick Reimer of Pembroke, Ont. is one such individual. He is among 74 Canadians legally allowed to grow and process marijuana. Reimer suffers from multiple sclerosis and uses

marijuana to fight nausea, fatigue and generally improve his quality of life. He would like to see marijuana legalized for all Canadians.

"The Marijuana Party is actually forcing politicians to talk about medical uses for the drug and not simply sniggering around and making little jokes," said Reimer.

Lawyer Paul Lewin, a member of the party, is fighting to decriminalize marijuana for patients like Reimer. Lewin is running for the Marijuana Party in Toronto's Trinity-Spadina riding. He acknowledged that the party's chances for representation in the House of Commons are slim, but sees a chance for his party's platform to be furthered by what ever party becomes the majority.

"We encourage other parties to steal our issue. Marijuana is not such a radical thing anymore. It's the right thing to do and the Canadian people want it," he said.

Recent polls support Lewin's belief that Canadians would like to see the law repealed. In a 1998 census by Statistics Canada, 72 per cent of Canadians said that marijuana

should definitely be legalized for medical purposes, using cancer and the drug's ability to help patients cope with pain as the primary reasoning for change. Also, 20 per cent of Canadians believed marijuana should be legalized altogether.

Canadian Alliance leader Stockwell Day has said there should be no jail time for simple possession and that the drug should be made legal for medicinal uses.

Tony Rownow, communications manager for the Alliance, said if Day succeeds in the upcoming election, decriminalization is a possibility.

"Health Canada is conducting studies now, and like everyone else, we would have to wait to see those results. We would be open to decriminalization for medical purposes, but only after seeing the report," Rownow said.

Other major political parties in Canada show some support for the cause. A resounding 83 per cent of New Democrat Party voters are in favour of the decriminalization of marijuana, however only 37 per cent of Liberal voters are in favour of its decriminalization.

Liberal spokesperson Ron Hallman said his party supports the use of marijuana for medicinal purposes.

"The Liberal government has decided to act in a compassionate manner and allow medicinal use when doctors have said it will help a particular patient with serious and life-threatening conditions."

But legalization for recreational purposes isn't on the party's agenda, he said. "The justice minister [Anne McLellan] says that she's willing to hear what people have to say, but so far we haven't heard that consensus, and that's the priority."

A spokesperson from the Conservative party said use and abuse of drugs should be treated as a health problem, but wouldn't elaborate on his party's platform the on decriminalization of marijuana.

With files from Darren Stewart, Ottawa Bureau Chief

Homeless granted suffrage

by Jennifer Salzwedel (CUP)

A recent amendment to the Canada Elections Act makes it possible for homeless people to vote for the first time during the Nov. 27 federal election.

People with no other residence can use a temporary residence, such as a shelter or hostel, as voter identification.

Other citizens living in temporary lodgings, such as students in campus residences or soldiers in barracks, have always been eligible to vote.

The impact of the new legislation will be determined by how many homeless people turn out to vote. Estimates on the number of homeless people in Canada are as high as 200,000. In Edmonton alone, the number of homeless people is estimated at over 1,000, while in Toronto it could be as high as 6,000.

Dave Chalmers, an intake worker at the Herb Jamieson Centre in Edmonton, says few of the people who frequent his shelter will vote.

"Thirty per cent of these guys don't even have ID," he said. "Probably 10 per cent of them will turn out, because these men are too busy trying to get their lives in order."

"They don't really see that anyone out there would make a dif-

ference in their lives. This election is a forgone conclusion anyway."

During the last federal election, the total national turnout was 69 per cent of eligible voters.

At Edmonton's Dream Centre, an inner-city house for women, the policy change was met with optimism. Elisha, who has been staying at the shelter for a week, said, "this is the first time I'll be voting, and I'm quite happy about it."

Another resident, Jennifer, said she would vote for the Liberal candidate because she likes the party's focus on the justice system.

Kim, who is also staying at the shelter, said she would not be voting.

"I don't know anything about who to vote for," she said. "I don't really follow politics or anything."

While the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms states that "every citizen of Canada has the right to vote in an election of the members of the House of Commons," the definition of universal voting rights has changed over time.

Women were granted suffrage before the 1918 federal election, while Aboriginal Canadians were allowed to vote on reserves for the first time in 1960.