

Marijuana and American Society: An Idea Whose Time Has Come

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One of the most seminal textbooks on public policy, *Agendas and Public Policies* by John Kingdon (1995), outlines the near impossibility of political paradigm shifts in the modern context. Special interests, party lines, corruption, money, and an innate fear of change often stall social progress even as the people embrace a more enlightened view. Throw morality into the mix, and a stalemate is created where fear and religion are often used as weapons.

Sometimes, albeit very rarely, a window opens in public policy creating a chance for real movement on a socially contentious issue. As Kingdon points out, to open this window certain conditions must be met. The issue has to become part of the discussion amongst decision-makers, and the decision-makers in power must have a desire to take that conversation and turn it into actual policy change. Marijuana certainly meets both of those conditions—but is it enough to end prohibition?

Opening a political window is not an assurance of change; it is merely a chance to clearly see beyond the current situation into other possibilities, a peek into what might be. The circumstances described above have opened the window for marijuana policy reform, but an open window is not the same as an open door. The public has seen what “could be” if they embrace change and reject prohibition, and why ending it is a good idea, but are they willing to walk through the door to a post-prohibition world?

Marijuana is not a new plant, and legalization is not a new idea, nor is support for it. Although used therapeutically

for thousands of years, when marijuana first became restricted in the 1930s, very few people had even heard of it let alone been negatively impacted by it. During the 1970s, a window opened momentarily when President Jimmy Carter publicly supported decriminalizing marijuana. Yet, since real policy and social change requires not only a window, but a door and a team to build it, why is now the time for marijuana policy change? What is it about how we live and communicate, about who we are and what we want now, that shakes the core of marijuana prohibition so heartily that real cracks are starting to show in its foundation?

The intimacy between the public and the political

In 1937, when the Marijuana Tax Act became the first federal restriction on marijuana, the relationship between politicians and the public was very different. Politicians in Washington, D.C., were far-away voices coming through the radio, with families gathering around to hear what was happening in their own backyards. Like parental figures vowing never to fight in front of the children, politics was spoon-fed to the public from behind a thick curtain. Over the years, newspapers, then television, and finally the Internet have succeeded in pulling back that curtain, leaving politicians vulnerable to exposure as fallible human beings. While they may still have power, today’s politicians are less like the Army father barking orders, and more like the dad you caught cheating on your mom who can’t really order you around anymore because you have seen his true character.



Public information on substance use issues, infidelities, and political wrong-doing makes it more difficult for politicians to act as moral watchdogs and models. If we know our Senator has cheated on her husband, and injured a child during a DUI, are we really going to swallow her “Just Say No” message? Instead, we start questioning why she gets to act like morality is a choice, while the rest of us face criminal sanctions for the same behaviors.

Wait—let me Google that

Another huge difference between now and the earlier days of reefer madness, is the way in which we share information and fact-check what we’re being fed. In the scenario described above with the family gathered around the radio for the latest news, not only did the voices come from trusted sources, but there was no way to know if what you were being told was the truth. In those days, trust was even more important. If that trust is broken, the information becomes as meaningless as hearing it on the school playground. It was a breach of that trust which forced NBC to take action against former anchor Brian Wil-

liams for exaggerating his experiences in the field.

Before the Internet, the public had little ability to verify what was coming out of the mouth of the government. Newspapers collectively took on this task, followed by television news, but these methods still relied on a limited number of messengers with as many agendas as the politicians themselves. A true game changer for politics, the Internet gave the average person the ability to quickly research and fact-check government and media claims alike. During the hearings for the Marijuana Tax Act in 1937, politicians and law enforcement testified that marijuana made Mexicans violent and was responsible for the gruesome murders of people in states like Florida. If these statements had been made during a government hearing today, tens of thousands of independent media sources as well as average citizens would be collecting and publishing information to dispute these claims in real time.

Baby Boomers: The beginning of the end

It’s not just the ways we communicate and access information that provide a platform for marijuana reform—it’s also who

we are as a society today. “Aging out” is a term that refers either to a change in behavior due to age and/or development, or to a change in the structure or beliefs of a group due to changes in its membership demographic. When it comes to marijuana use, we often talk about aging out as a process of reducing or discontinuing use due to taking on additional life responsibilities and being in a place where using illegal substances is too risky. We can also refer to aging out when describing the demographic changes in government. People born just prior to marijuana prohibition (around 1930) grew up with a very strong anti-marijuana message during their youth. Movies like *Reefer Madness* and messages about the dangers of marijuana pervaded communities during this time. These folks are now at the age where many of them are starting to retire from their political positions. By contrast, people born around 1950 or later have a very different view of marijuana. The Baby Boomer generation brought marijuana back into style during the peace movement of the 1960s. Many of these folks are now moving into high levels of political power (e.g., Barack Obama) and have softer views on marijuana because they have used it, and many still do, though perhaps to ease the symptoms of aging.

I'm an activist: For a living!

Until recently, parents would shamefully whisper about their 30-year-old son who worked at “some non-profit” trying to save whales, or the environment, or something, and don't they wish he would get a “real job.” Those times are changing. The rise in non-profits and activism as an occupation has drawn some of the brightest minds from the best universities who have an eye on changing the world. Organizations from PETA to MAPS to the Drug Policy Alliance have created a home for like-minded individuals who want to use their intellect for good, and for their work to move beyond the ivory tower. Activism is no longer a dirty word, and is an increasingly effective means of bringing attention to and changing social norms around very important issues, from gay marriage to mass incarceration to marijuana legalization. Groups such as Students for Sensible Drug Policy act as breeding grounds on campuses across the country, giving young people with a mind and a social axe to grind an outlet and a cause. These students often go on to positions of power, and many of them are leading and shaping the emerging marijuana landscape.

Plant vs. Pharma

One more component to current shifts in marijuana policy has to do with a larger social shift away from (and suspicion of) pharmaceutical products. The United States makes up 5% of the world's population and makes up 99% of the world's hydrocodone consumption. Prescription drug overdoses are surpassing

car accidents as the number one cause of accidental death, and in the U.S. heroin use is on the rise because people are becoming dependent on opiate pain medication, and then being cut off from their pharmaceutical supply. In the midst of this, GMO crops are scaring people, suspicions around antibiotics and

vaccines are pervasive, and stores such as Target are massively investing in organic produce. These changes are all part a societal shift away from chemical approaches to wellness and towards plant medicines and local agriculture. Research shows that around 75% of medical marijuana patients use marijuana as a substitute for prescription drugs, and states with access to medical marijuana have enjoyed a reduction in prescription drug overdose deaths. In California, Flow Kana is the first company to offer marijuana straight from the farmer to your doorstep, a sign

of the movement towards a farm-to-table culture and a preference for natural over synthetic.

After we go through the door...

Marijuana is now legal for adults in four states plus Washington, D.C., and legal for medical use in 23 states plus the capitol. The door is wide open, and slowly but surely, states are marching through. While advocates try to help the rest of the states through the door, assuring them nothing bad will happen, opponents are warning them that a post-prohibition world is too dangerous and risky. The tension will continue, but that need not cause us to lose sight of how truly unique these times are, and how great the opportunities. The door could still close and the curtain could once again be drawn shut. We must not rely the inevitability of progress, but capitalize on the openings described above, using them not only to open the door to a post-prohibition world, but to blow it off its rusty old hinges. 🚪

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