



# The Opportunities Party Real Deal Cannabis Reform

## PART 1: INTRODUCTION

*Our current drug law is outdated and not fit for purpose. The prohibition model set out under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1975 is a barrier for people seeking help if they need it. Drug addiction, like alcohol addiction tears families apart – but so does our drug law, which not only fails to protect people from harm, but actually adds to it.<sup>1</sup>*

In overhauling this outdated Act The Opportunities Party has developed an evidenced-based policy that will more accurately reflect the internationally recognised intention of drug policy – to **reduce harm**.

Assessing harm is an area that the current system fails to effectively do. While the goal of the current criminalisation policy is harm-minimisation based on the familiar strategies of controlling supply, reducing demand and limiting the problem – it fails to account for the effects of exposing users and growers to gangs and to the criminal justice system. The evidence is mounting that these consequences have greater detrimental impacts than those from cannabis use itself. The criminalisation approach also ties up criminal justice resources that could be more effectively directed elsewhere.

*Like most drugs (including alcohol and cigarettes), we recognise that abstinence is the safest option.*

Regular usage of cannabis is associated with health risk such as:

- problems with healthy brain development among youth;
- depression or anxiety injury;
- symptoms of chronic bronchitis;<sup>2</sup>

However as with alcohol and cigarettes, abstinence is unrealistic. Prohibition flies in the face of popular demand and leads to illicit supply and usage.<sup>3</sup> The evidence shows that criminalisation of cannabis has had no significant statistical impact on reducing use, nor is there any evidence that decriminalisation increases use.<sup>4, 5, 6, 7</sup> The health risks listed above are still prevalent with or without prohibition. There are better, safer ways to regulate cannabis without the stigmatisation and associated social harm and taxpayer cost imposed by making it illegal.

We are able to look to a number of American states as examples of the impacts of full legalisation (Colorado and Alaska being the first to legalise). It is still early days however the evidence suggests that legalisation has decreased use of cannabis amongst youth, presumably thanks to increased education. For adults there has been a small increase of cannabis use and related outcomes, although this seems to be driven by a falling price as growers scale up production.<sup>8,9</sup>

It is important here to note the comprehensive differences between cannabis and other common drugs here in New Zealand like heroin, cocaine and especially methamphetamine (or P as it is known in New Zealand). These are all chemically, medically, socially and economically very different to cannabis in terms of harm.<sup>10</sup>

The evidence shows our focus needs to shift from dealing with cannabis as a criminal justice issue towards seeing it as a health issue. Aligning our law with the objective of reducing harm will enable us to meet the underlying demand for cannabis but at the same time minimise the problems arising from its inevitable use.

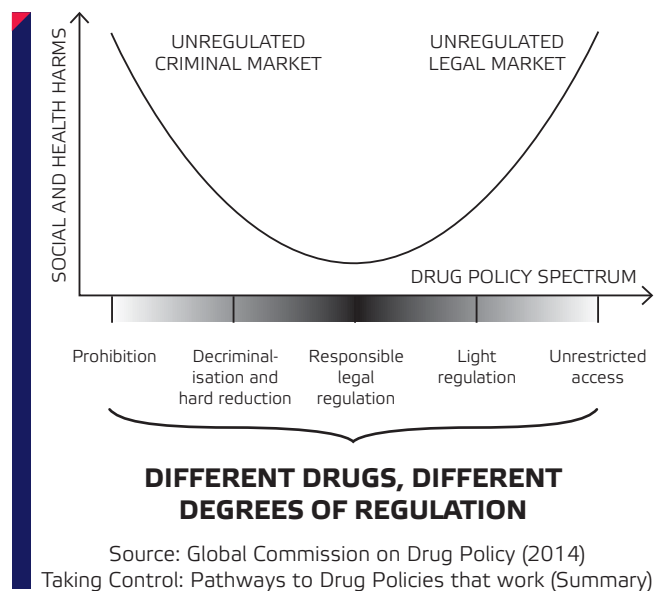
***Our current approach is also missing a massive opportunity. Creating a legal market for cannabis allows for taxing the proceeds which can in turn be spent reducing the harm caused by all drugs. It also allows for strict regulation of quality.***

Legalisation does not necessarily mean liberal availability and promotion as is the case with alcohol. It is possible to put in place stricter regulation where we can reach a middle ground of reducing harm while allowing a certain freedom of use.

The graph (right) illustrates a generic spectrum of options. It highlights the evidence that at both extremes – prohibition and unrestricted access – there exist social and health harms that most would find unacceptable. Appropriately regulated legal drug markets can deliver the best social and health outcomes.<sup>11</sup>

In short, responsible legal regulation is the sweet spot where society’s goals are most likely to be achieved. Those goals are well described by the Canadian taskforce on cannabis usage:

- Protect young people by keeping cannabis out of the hands of children and youth;
- Keep profits out of the hands of criminals, particularly organized crime;
- Reduce the burdens on police and the justice system associated with simple possession-of-cannabis offences;
- Prevent people from entering the criminal justice system and receiving criminal records for simple cannabis possession offences;
- Protect public health and safety by strengthening where appropriate, laws and enforcement measures that deter and punish more serious cannabis offences, particularly selling and distributing to children and youth, selling outside of the regulatory framework, and operating a motor vehicle while under the influence of cannabis;
- Ensure people are well-informed through sustained and appropriate public health campaigns and for youth in particular, ensure that risks are understood;



- Establish and enforce a strict system of production, distribution and sales, taking a public health approach, with regulation of quality and safety (e.g., child-proof packaging, warning labels), restriction of access, and application of taxes, with programmatic support for addiction treatment, mental health support and education programs;
- Provide access to quality-controlled cannabis for medical purposes consistent with federal policy and court decisions; and
- Enable ongoing data collection, including gathering baseline data, to monitor the impact of the new framework.<sup>12</sup>

Goals beyond this that extend to our unique culture here in New Zealand include:

- Protecting Maori, who are over represented in the criminal justice system due in part to cannabis offenses; and
- Promoting community and economic development for small rural communities with a lucrative crop that would also protect the natural environment.

## **PART 2: POLICY OBJECTIVES OF CANNABIS LAW REFORM**

### **BACKGROUND**

Our approach to developing a policy on cannabis has been to use a deliberative democracy process, akin to that we are advocating to be used by governments generally as part of strengthening our democratic process.<sup>13, 14</sup>

This began by inviting TOP members to make submissions on their desired legislative approach. There were a variety of responses, but the common voice was overwhelmingly in favour of regulated legalisation. For Round Two we developed several scenarios (including the status quo) of various levels of regulation and control. We then presented the scenarios to our full party membership for their feedback (not revealing the preferences from the submissions) and again the results were conclusive. The preference is for regulated legalisation of cannabis.

From these results we have been developing our policy, utilising the input from a number of experts and surveying the literature on a number of precedents from overseas.

As with many areas of policy there is a lack of comprehensive, high quality research. Being mindful of these limitations is imperative and it is therefore more appropriate to refer to our recommendations as “evidence-informed” rather than “evidence-based”. The relationship between policy and evidence is complex and our policy recommendations were influenced by values expressed by stakeholders and members of the public, as well as by the available scientific evidence.

## ***Reducing Harm: Will legalisation have an overall net positive impact on society?***

Cannabis is different to other illegal drugs in our society for several reasons:

- Deaths from overdose do not occur;
- Strength of addiction is very low;
- Use tends to start early in life or not at all and declines with age; and
- Many of the adverse social effects of cannabis are the result of its legal status, not its chemical properties.<sup>15</sup>

Despite its illegal status, cannabis use is wide spread. According to our Ministry of Health figures:

- 11% of New Zealanders aged 15 years and over reported using cannabis in the year ended June 2013;
- 3.8% reporting that they consumed it at least weekly; and
- 42% of the population reported consuming cannabis at some time in their life.

Because of this prevalence laws are routinely flouted by large sections of the population, which brings other laws and the wider law enforcement system into disrepute. The New Zealand Police have stated that organised crime is linked to every step of the cannabis supply chain and that buyers and sellers risk victimisation when transacting in a criminal market.<sup>16</sup> The illegal status of cannabis means that for those undeterred by the threat of criminal sanction, costs are higher than would be the case if the product were legal.<sup>17</sup>

The New Zealand Treasury has calculated that a change in the legal status of cannabis could reap an additional \$150 million in revenue and reduce spending on drug enforcement by around 40% (\$180 million). From this it can be concluded that the cost of the current enforcement policy is over \$300 million per year.<sup>18</sup>

Several governments have recently moved away from a policy of blanket prohibition. While evidence from these decisions is still not overly conclusive there are trends developing from places such as Colorado that have legalised production and sale.



*Dealing with cannabis through the criminal justice system merely increases the harm it does.*

An early findings report from the Colorado Department of Public Safety after legalisation there shows that:<sup>19, 20</sup>

- Use by youth (under 18) was unaffected, and may have even declined;
- Use by adults over 18 has increased, but this may be due to the fact that following legalisation there has been an increase in supply resulting in a price fall (which would not happen under TOP's proposals);
- Cannabis related arrests have halved and court filings are down 81%. This has freed up police resources, leading to a 3% drop in property crime and 6% fall in violent crime;
- There has been some increase in health costs due to increased cannabis use;
- State revenues were significant and larger than expected – \$US135m in 2014; and
- Significant sales were made to tourists travelling to Colorado.

It is important to note that while usage rates have increased the regulatory framework in Colorado is for full commercialisation and is completely different to what TOP is proposing.

Legalisation has not completely eliminated the illicit cannabis market. Legal suppliers must seek a license, comply with cannabis-specific as well as general business rules and, of course, pay tax. All of these are costly and some producers (as is the case in every industry, legal or not) may seek to operate outside the law.

- As we have made clear, the purpose of changing the legislation is to reduce the overall harm that is associated with the use of cannabis. This approach considers the risks associated with cannabis use, including;
- The risks of developmental harm to youth;
- The risks associated with patterns of consumption, including frequent use and co-use of cannabis with alcohol and tobacco;
- The risks to vulnerable populations; and
- And the risks related to interactions with the illicit market.

***In forming our position we have considered scientific evidence and input from stakeholders, as well as how other jurisdictions have attempted to minimize harm from use.***

Taking all these factors into account it is clear to us, with the current information available, that by legalising cannabis we give ourselves the best opportunity to reduce harm. The overall harm reduction can be rationalised by the summation of the outcomes that both prohibition and legalisation provide (based on early indications that legalisation has only a small impact on use). This is for 3 main reasons:

1. The largest user group for cannabis is 18-24, and it is widely accepted that the current system has not prevented this group from attaining cannabis. What it has done is exposed them (and all other groups) to an illegal, unregulated market, creating significant harm from both criminal justice repercussions and environmental factors such as exposure to gangs. Legalisation will remove the majority of this harm.
2. It is clear from both the New Zealand-specific evidence and internationally that the illegal status of cannabis has had limited effect in reducing consumption and therefore many of those that will smoke will do so regardless of its legal status. By regulating the market and selling cannabis as a commodity, revenue that has been previously spent enforcing prohibition can be redirected to controlling other illicit substances. Meanwhile supplementary revenue made from taxation and licencing can be directed back to the health system to help reduce drug harm.
3. Due to its current illegal status there are zero controls on how cannabis is produced. Consumers have almost no way of knowing where the product has come from, the chemicals that have been used to produce it, the chemical properties of the plant (THC – Tetrahydrocannabinol, CBD – Cannabidiol etc), as well as no protection under the Fair Trading Act. By bringing this under the banner of regulation the whole supply chain can be monitored to ensure proper health and safety processes are followed.

Since there is little evidence to support claims that criminalisation reduces use, it can be argued that the social harm of cannabis criminalisation outweighs those that legalising cannabis would bring.

Evidence has shown that there is a significant correlation between the purchase age of alcohol and the range of harm that consumption causes.<sup>22</sup> The current law is a minimum purchase age of 18 which was reduced from 20 in 1999. Following this change:

- There was a significant increase in hospital presentations of intoxicated people aged under 20;
- There have been increases in the trends for rates of prosecutions for excess breath alcohol, road traffic crashes involving alcohol, and fatal road traffic crashes involving alcohol among several youth cohorts in the years after 1999; and
- The increase in alcohol-related crashes among 15 to 19 year olds was higher relative to older age groups in the four years following the law change, and the higher rate of increase in road traffic crashes among the younger age group has continued since.<sup>23</sup>

Conversely, raising the purchase age has been found to reduce harmful consumption and related harm, including drink driving, car crashes, injuries and deaths, and other health and social harm. There is also some evidence of the 'halo' effect; that lowering the drinking age increases harmful drinking amongst those below the legal drinking age. Therefore, the reduction in harm benefits both older and younger cohorts.<sup>24</sup>

*It seems clear that, along with other policy and societal changes, reducing the minimum age for purchasing alcohol from 20 to 18 years in 1999 contributed to increased alcohol-related harm to young people in New Zealand.<sup>25</sup>*

Accentuating the harm caused to youth by alcohol is the effect that it has on developing brains, similar to what we have seen with cannabis. Therefore any significant changes to youth consumption are felt more acutely in the long term.

Given the overall goal of reducing harm, TOP advocates a legal purchase age of 20 for cannabis.

## THE 10 P'S OF CANNABIS POLICY<sup>26</sup>

The main questions that need to be answered with any legalisation are summarised under the following headings, known as the "10 P's of Cannabis Policy".

### 1. PRODUCTION

Regulating the way in which cannabis is grown allows the government to ensure that there are controls in place to regulate supply.

**TOP's view:** *Individuals will be allowed to grow up to 2 plants. Commercial cannabis growers must be licensed with a goal of allowing small scale suppliers the ability to be competitive in the market.*

TOP will introduce restrictions on :

- The number of producers / licences granted;
- Quantities produced by each producer; and
- The type of product allowed – I.e THC levels (tetrahydrocannabinol is the main mind-altering ingredient found in the cannabis plant).

### 2. PROFIT

Research suggests that roughly 80% of cannabis expenditures in the United States are made by 20% of the users.<sup>27</sup> These are the heavy users who report using cannabis on a daily or near-daily basis. If producers have a profit motive they will seek to maximise the numbers of these heavy users. Such a business strategy will increase individual harm and detrimental social consequences.

By way of comparison, there is a wealth of research suggesting that alcohol monopolies are better for public health than less regulated options.<sup>28</sup>

**TOP's view:** *sale of cannabis must be made through licensed trusts, similar to alcohol licensing trusts. These charities would establish their own retail outlets and would be tasked with minimising the health impact of cannabis use. They would reinvest any profits into local drug education and mental health services, as well as after-school recreation for teenagers that are focussed on reducing drug use (as per the Iceland model).<sup>29</sup> Local Authorities would have the power to decide where stores are located or even opt out of having stores entirely. For areas without retail there would also be a website operated on behalf of central government with the profits reinvested as above.*

### 3. PROMOTION

Countries such as Uruguay have banned cannabis marketing, while regulators in Colorado and Washington have attempted to limit advertising, however they cannot ban it because that would be inconsistent with the doctrine of “commercial free speech”. The ability to still advertise has had a detrimental effect on restricting use. Canada’s new legalisation framework provides a good model for us to follow around advertising, as does our own Psychoactive Substances Act and Prostitution Reform Act 2003.

**TOP’s view:** *We need to restrict public advertising in order to prevent the commercialisation of cannabis.*

### 4. PREVENTION

Restrictions on access, days and times of sale, age, quantity etc.

Accepting that the purpose of the legalisation is to make the smoking of cannabis a safer activity than it is currently, the main areas of prevention would need to be 1) overuse; and 2) restricting use by youths. Evidence suggests harm on less than fully developed brains is greater than for adults.<sup>30</sup>

Experience with alcohol has shown that policy restrictions on purchase age are associated with lower levels of use<sup>31</sup>, which is key to our overall goal of reducing total drug harm.

**TOP’s view:** *Ensuring that legalisation does not overly expose youth to cannabis is the main priority, so education and regulation of products and advertising is the key. The age for purchasing cannabis will be set at 20. We will put in place strict controls and penalties to ensure minors are not supplied. For heavy users we will use the revenue to fund increased drug treatment. Sale of cannabis will not be allowed on premises licensed to sell alcohol.*

### 5. POLICING

There is clear evidence from controlled laboratory trials that cannabis use reduces psychomotor performance, increasing the overall risk of accidents particularly while driving. This has been a key issue raised in international consultation over cannabis reform. However, due to the current prevalence of cannabis, impaired driving is not a new challenge. It is a criminal offence that exists today and is a challenge that must continue to be addressed, irrespective of how or when cannabis is legalised. The current system that is used by police is robust, and the best available measure until testing science is developed further.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, in terms of policy the policing of this issue should not significantly change.

Debate continues about the ideal (from a policy perspective) blood and/or saliva levels to indicate marijuana intoxication while driving. However a saliva test cannot show impairment only the presence of a drug, which does not necessarily imply impairment. Innovations are in development in various jurisdictions in the United States and abroad, including defined levels for impaired driving and how these can be analysed by saliva sampling. But as mentioned, these are not yet considered robust.<sup>33</sup>

**TOP’s view:** *Certain aspects will remain illegal such as selling to minors, driving under the influence, and production without a licence. With respect to driving TOP advocates the current system. Drivers that have given reason to be considered under the influence, such as through driving erratically, will be given a roadside impairment test, and if failed will be blood tested. Evidence shows that the overwhelming majority – 95 percent of those who were asked for a blood specimen – tested positive for drugs, indicating police are judging driver behaviour well and not over-referring drivers.<sup>34</sup>*

## 6. PENALTIES

**TOP's view:** Current penalties propel far too many people into the criminal justice system. Low level offences (such as smoking in an areas designated by Local Authorities as 'cannabis free' and growing more than 2 plants) will be punished with on-the-spot fines. Selling to minors will remain a criminal offence.

## 7. POTENCY

There are dozens of cannabinoids in the cannabis plant, but tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) is the chemical compound that receives the most attention. THC is what gets users intoxicated and can increase the probability of panic or anxiety attacks. Limiting the amount of THC available in certain products can reduce the side effects that can develop with THC.

Of course, other cannabinoids should be considered, including cannabidiol (CBD), which is receiving an increasing amount of scientific attention. Some researchers believe CBD can offset some of the psychoactive effects of THC.

**TOP's view:** We will impose a tax according to THC levels and put in place regulations to control potency. We will work with the scientific community to keep these regulations up to date with the developing evidence base.

## 8. PURITY

**TOP's view:** Regulation will allow for standards of production, making the product safer by ensuring limits on the amount of harmful substances that can be used such as pesticides (used by growers to protect the plant from pests and can be poisonous), and measuring for mould and fungi levels. Regulation will also ensure products are not "cut" or mixed with other substances.

## 9. PRICE

Evidence shows that usage increases as price decreases. However if the price becomes too high there is the possibility of re-entrenching the black market.<sup>35</sup> Therefore a balance needs to be struck.

If prices are not managed correctly we could have a situation like Colorado where due to increased production the market is becoming flooded and wholesale prices have almost halved in less than a year, leading to increasing usage.<sup>36</sup>

**TOP's view:** The price will be controlled by both central government taxation based on THC levels (as with cigarettes and alcohol) and a minimum price. The rationale is to find the price point where demand is static or reduced from what existed under the illegal market, while still discouraging illicit supply. Any profits that are made are redistributed to the community.

## 10. PERMANENCY

Regulators must have the ability to adjust legislation. We have a lot to learn about cannabinoids and new cannabis products, and there should be mechanisms in place for incorporating new information into these regimes.

**TOP's view:** We will use regulations to keep the regime up to date with the latest science.



**PART 3: THE OPPORTUNITIES PARTY  
CANNABIS POLICY**

- Set a national minimum age of purchase of 20;
  - Apply comprehensive restrictions to the advertising and promotion of cannabis and related merchandise by any means, including sponsorship, endorsements and branding, similar to the restrictions on promotion of tobacco products;
  - Require plain packaging for cannabis products that allows the following information on packages: company name, strain name, price, amounts of delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) and cannabidiol (CBD) and warnings and other labelling requirements;
  - Require opaque, re-sealable packaging that is childproof or child-resistant to limit children's access to any cannabis product;
  - Create public smoking areas, similar to current liquor ban areas;
  - Limit the ability to 'mix' cannabis and alcohol by ensuring they must be purchased from separate outlets;
  - Additionally, for edibles:
    - Implement packaging with standardized, single servings, with a universal THC symbol;
    - Set a maximum amount of THC per serving and per product;
    - Ensure they are not produced in a form that would appeal to children;
  - Prohibit mixed drug products, for example cannabis-infused alcoholic beverages or cannabis products with tobacco, nicotine or caffeine;
  - Require appropriate labelling on cannabis products, including:
    - Text warning labels (e.g., "KEEP OUT OF REACH OF CHILDREN");
    - Levels of THC and CBD;
    - For edibles, impose labelling requirements that apply to food and beverage products;
  - Create a flexible legislative framework that could adapt to new evidence on specific product types, on the use of additives or sweeteners, or on specifying limits of THC, CBD or other components;
  - Provide regulatory oversight for cannabis concentrates to minimise the risks associated with illicit production;
  - Develop strategies to encourage consumption of less potent cannabis, including a price and tax scheme based on potency to discourage purchase of high-potency products;
  - Develop and implement factual public education strategies to inform New Zealanders as to risks of problematic use and lower-risk use guidance;
  - Conduct the necessary economic analysis to establish an approach to tax and price that balances health protection with the goal of reducing the illicit market;
  - Commit to using revenue from cannabis as a source of funding for administration, education, research, health care for other drug abuse.;
  - Design a tax scheme based on THC potency to discourage purchase of high-potency products;
  - Implement as soon as possible an evidence-informed public education campaign, targeted at the general population but with an emphasis on youth, parents and vulnerable populations;
  - Facilitate and monitor ongoing research on cannabis and impairment, considering implications for occupational health and safety policies;
  - Work with the relevant health and safety bodies to better understand potential occupational health and safety issues related to cannabis impairment;
  - Work with the relevant bodies to facilitate the development of workplace impairment policies; and
  - Train police to improve their ability to conduct roadside impairment testing.
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## FOOTNOTES

- 1 <https://www.drugfoundation.org.nz/policy-and-advocacy/drug-law-reform/>
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