

Stoner Stigma

“The stigma ends tonight,” says Ian Power, the 46-year-old lifelong cannabis activist moments after becoming the first person in 95 years to legally buy recreational cannabis in Canada. He smiles wide, proudly displaying the paper bag of marijuana of which he plans to frame on his wall with a plaque reading, *October 17th 2018 “We Won.”*

October 17th 2018 is the day cannabis became legal in Canada, and it is indeed a victory for many Canadians. The day is reminiscent of the release of a new iPhone or a blockbuster film with some lineups in front of dispensaries spanning blocks, and eager users like Power camping hours in advance to be the first in line. Smokers congregate in parks and on street corners, places they have always smoked, but now do so without fear of persecution. Certainly, cannabis activists have made progress, but as tempting as it is to declare their decades-long struggle over, they have more work to do.

Cannabis was not always illegal in Canada. In 1801, the government gave hemp seeds to farmers in order to stimulate the country’s hemp industry. Hemp is a substance used to craft textiles, fabrics, paper, and eco-friendly plastics, but because hemp is derived from cannabis sativa the government made it illegal to grow the substance on Canadian soil. This change came in 1923 when Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King and his administration introduced the *Act to Prohibit the Improper Use of Opium and other Drugs*, banning opium, cocaine, morphine, and cannabis. Canada was one of the first countries to prohibit cannabis, and yet, historians cannot pinpoint an exact reason why.

“There was no discussion of it in Parliament, there's almost nothing in the archival records about why they added marijuana,” said Catherine Carstairs, history professor at the

University of Guelph and author of the 2006 book *Jailed for Possession: Illegal Drug Use, Regulation and Power in Canada, 1920-1961*.

Historians can only speculate on what compelled lawmakers at the time to ban cannabis. One popular theory involves a 1922 book written by women's rights activist Emily Murphy entitled *Black Candle*. Critics accuse it of being a racist, anti-immigration book that exaggerated the ill-effects of marijuana by equating its use to criminal tendencies. Carstairs, however, doubts this theory's validity, the more likely explanation being that lawmakers observed similar legislation in certain US states, and decided to follow suit.

Either way, this shows how impressionable the law can be. These laws were able to take effect not because of a public outcry or an epidemic of cannabis-related deaths, but because the substance had a poor reputation. These negative portraits of cannabis have persisted throughout the decades by way of public discourse and stereotypes in popular media of what cannabis users and dealers look and act like. Just as the States' Civil Rights Act did not end racial discrimination, changing the law on cannabis does not vanquish these negative attitudes. The only way to have a practice, and the people who participate in the practice, truly become embraced and integrated into society is to remove the stigma towards cannabis users built over years of anti-drug campaigns.

Much of these attitudes have improved gradually over the years. According to a survey conducted by the Cannabis Council of Canada in September 2018, a month prior to legalization, 46% of Canadians supported the government's decision to legalize marijuana. 30% opposed the decision, and the remaining 24% did not feel strongly either way. 70% of Canadians support or can at least accept legalization, and yet, many cannabis users still feel the need to keep their recreational use understated for fear of judgement.

The National Post contacted all 344 sitting Members of Parliament, asking if they had ever used marijuana recreationally. 85% of MPs declined to comment, and of the 52 that did respond, only 12 admitted to consuming cannabis at least once in their lives. This number is a far cry from a 2012 nation-wide survey conducted by Stats Canada that found that 43% of Canadians ages 15 and older have used cannabis in their lifetimes. This discrepancy means one of two things: MPs are far less likely to have consumed marijuana, or they are less likely to admit to consuming marijuana because it may hurt their polling numbers. Given the number of MPs who abstained to answer, it is reasonable to deduce that the latter is true.

Even most of the politicians who openly admit to using marijuana do so in a manner that distances themselves from it by way of three methods. First, they describe a friend offering it to them at a social gathering. Second, they highlight how young and foolish they were at the time. Third, they insist that smoking “wasn’t for me,” ensuring the public that they would never touch the stuff again. Seldomly does a politician say they had an enjoyable experience with pot and would be open to trying it again someday.

Their decision to distance themselves from cannabis use is understandable. After all, their public image is something they always need to consider, lest they lose the support of those who voted them in. The majority of citizens support the use of marijuana, but may hesitate to support a politician who smokes recreationally in his/her leisure time. With so many preconception of cannabis users planted in Canadians’ minds through the media, it is hard for citizens to envision an avid cannabis user as also being a competent professional. The “stoner” character archetype can be seen throughout popular culture, depicting those with a fondness for cannabis as lazy, unintelligent, and the last kind of person you would want to vote for. These are the people with the tie-dye shirts and 5-word vocabularies, with Bob Marley posters on their walls and bags of

munchies in their hands. Although these characters are hardly vilified, instead acting more as comedic relief in the films and TV they appear in, they are certainly not respected. For a politician to admit not only to using weed, but to enjoying it too, people may equate them to this stoner stereotype, and their reputations would take a hit as a result.

“I am not a consumer of marijuana, but, yes, I’ve already tried it,” said Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to a group of reporters in 2013 when he was the leader of the Liberal Party. This paradoxical statement speaks to the conflicting concepts of use and identification when it comes to cannabis. Trudeau has used marijuana five or six times, he says, but does not want to be associated with the stoner archetype because of the negative residuals that come with it.

With 70% of Canadians supporting legalization, it is easy to believe that most Canadians are universally accepting of cannabis consumption. Most Canadians are, in fact, accepting of it, but only a particular kind of use by a particular kind of user. We can look at the methods of how politicians frame their experiences with weed to see how citizens’ attitudes on what constitutes socially-accepted cannabis use is coded. Coded not in a binary sense of if consuming weed is in itself good or bad, but rather what context it is consumed in. It is acceptable to use weed if you are young, perhaps early twenties. It is acceptable to smoke weed at parties, but only if you are not the one to initiate it. These variables are what, in the eyes of many, separate a functional member of society who happens to smoke weed in his/her leisure time from what many would identify as a “stoner” or “pothead.” It is by following this code that politicians like Trudeau can acknowledge their drug use without the public painting them as a passive pothead. But when one steps outside of these acceptable boundaries, smoking pot not at a social gathering, but casually at home, and not as an experimental youth, but a mature adult, they are branded a stoner, no different than the pothead caricatures on TV.

It is this assigned form of identity that has been problematic for cannabis users, and remains an issue despite legalization. After all, it was after legalization that 38-year-old Brampton resident Anand Rampersad lost custody of his children as a result of his history with the substance. Rampersad makes a living working for his father's car detailing business. He arrives on time, often stays late, and insists on wearing a collared shirt despite that his work does not require it. He drives his two sons to school every day, attends all of their little league softball games, and two or three times a week, after they are asleep in bed, Rampersad smokes a joint in his backyard. His highs typically last an hour, fading entirely before he brushes his teeth for bed, and though cannabis was never recommended by a doctor, he swears it helps him with his anxiety. Rampersad found no trouble balancing his responsibilities as a father and employee with his taste for weed until his wife filed for divorce, thrusting them into a custody battle for their sons, his wife seeking sole custody and him seeking shared. Like many family court disputes, proceedings become ugly. Rampersad's ex-wife uses his frequent use of marijuana as her central point of attack.

"She told the judge, 'don't let a pothead raise my children,'" Rampersad says, his emotions still fresh several months after the fact. "They act like I'm an addict. She drinks just as much as I smoke, but I'm the bad guy here."

There is a double standard with cannabis compared to alcoholic beverages. Most reasonable people would acknowledge that drinking alcohol multiple times a week does not make one an alcoholic so long as it is not damaging to their health and well being. People are able to distinguish between varying levels of drinkers because it is a more common and accepted practice. When it comes to cannabis consumption, however, an act whose effects are not completely understood by most citizens, the distinction is harder to make.

Rampersad denies being addicted to marijuana to the judge, but it is the word of a pothead against that of a concerned mother. When one parent requests sole custody over another, judges typically opt for joint or shared custody unless there is evidence of significant financial hardship, a history of domestic abuse, mental illness, and/or substance abuse issues. According to Rampersad, his ex-wife cited a past conviction for marijuana possession along with his current smoking habits to convince the judge that he was addicted to marijuana and was thus unfit to parent. The judge ultimately decides that the kids would be better off with their mother, denying Rampersad's request of shared custody and enforcing joint, of which his ex-wife serves as the primary custodian. Rampersad now only sees his sons every other weekend, where he spends their limited time together shooting hoops in the driveway and eating ice cream at Dairy Queen.

"I'd have gotten more time with them if it wasn't for all that pot stuff," Rampersad insists. "Without a doubt."

Courts of all levels have not been historically kind to cannabis users and dealers, putting thousands in prison for the crime of possessing and distributing a substance now legal. As opposed to cannabis users, who are often depicted as unmotivated and dimwitted in popular media, cannabis dealers are portrayed as morally repugnant and dangerous. This is not to say all weed dealers are blameless paragons of virtue. They, like every occupation, have members capable of heinous acts that have no place in civilized society. It should be noted, however, that roughly 40% of people incarcerated in the United States are in for non-violent drug offenses.

The idea that cannabis dealers are all predatorial degenerates dates back to the first major anti-marijuana propaganda film, 1936's *Reefer Madness*. The film chronicles how two teenagers' lives spiral out of control when they get involved with marijuana dealers and begin smoking their product. In addition to drug dealing itself, the dealers also commit murder and attempted rape,

while they descend into insanity brought about by a marijuana addiction. The film is cartoonish in its depiction of pot and its dealers, clearly misunderstanding the effects of the substance, and yet, it set the foundation for decades of anti-weed campaigns.

"Drug dealers are dorks! Don't even talk to 'em!" says Donatello, the third member of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, in a 90s PSA aimed at children. In this ad, a young boy is seen gathering books from his locker when a larger, older kid approaches and pressures him into taking a joint. The young boy calls the dealer a "turkey," slams his locker shut, and storms off as the Ninja Turtles applaud his decision.

Most medical professionals agree that because children's brains have not finished developing, they should not consume any amount of THC. So, if the objective of youth-focused propaganda is to deter kids from trying cannabis, their cause is noble. These campaigns, however, become problematic when they base their warning to youth about drugs and drug dealers out of fear and antagonism rather than reason and logic. Rather than explaining to kids the scientific reason they should stay away from drugs, these PSAs demonize and belittle dealers. Drug dealers and users are the only groups of people in the country that it is socially acceptable to teach children to hate.

Demonizing cannabis dealers, making them out to be criminals on par with murderers and rapists skews citizens' moral compasses. US President Donald Trump publicly endorses instituting the death penalty for drug dealers, and Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte has condoned extrajudicial murders of suspected dealers. The National Football League suspended Cleveland Browns player Josh Gordon for an entire season when he tested positive for marijuana, but only suspended Baltimore Ravens player Ray Rice for two games after he physically assaulted his wife. Unjust penalties like these are also present in the legal system, one

of the most egregious examples being former CBC producer Robert “Rosie” Rowbotham receiving a total sentence of 69 years for conspiracy to traffic, possess, and sell marijuana. This is the longest drug sentencing in the history of Canada, a country whose maximum penalty for the sexual assault of a minor is only 14 years.

One cannabis dealer who defies these preconceptions of the field is Abi Roach, the owner of the longest-running weed lounge in North America, Hotbox Café. Roach’s family moved to Canada from Israel when she was a young girl. Her entrepreneurial spirit reared its head when she was a teenager, selling handmade jewelry on Queen Street. One day she met a man and woman who introduced her to hemp, and taught her to make hemp jewelry. Eventually, she started selling weed to pay for post-secondary school, and after trying her hand as an art student, decided to take a small business course. After she graduated, she went to the bank with a business plan to open a store, hoping they would approve her for a youth entrepreneurship loan. When the loan officer asked her what kind of business it would be, 19-year-old Roach told him it would be a headshop. The loan officer did not know what a head shop was, so Roach told him, “we’re gonna sell bongs and pipes and rolling papers.” The loan officer looked at her stone-faced and was silent for what felt like an eternity.

“Glass,” he finally said. “You’re gonna sell glass, okay? Glass.”

Roach is thankful to this day for what that loan officer did for her. It would have been a tough sell for a bank to entrust a loan to a teenager trying to open a shop selling accessories for a then illegal substance. Roach got the loan and opened her shop, creating a safe space for weed enthusiasts to smoke, while selling any tool a cannabis user would need, except, of course, the cannabis itself. With legalization, however, Roach is making plans to add weed to the menu, turning Hotbox Café into a one-stop shop for all things cannabis-related.

“The whole concept behind the Hotbox Lounge was to have a coffee shop where it was just perfectly as normal to go with a friend and smoke a joint or, now, like share a vape, as it is to go out with your friends and have a beer or a glass of wine over dinner,” Roach explains.

She is a living example of the potential cannabis dealers have if embraced by the system. Trump and Duterte would have seen her executed for her crimes, but she turned her illegal activity into a thriving business, and did so without harming anyone. Unfortunately, the government bars those with past marijuana convictions from getting involved in the industry they have knowledge of.

Roach is one of the many at the forefront of changing the conversation around cannabis consumption. She understands that there is a stigma around cannabis that legalization does not expunge, and through her business ventures, seeks to foster an environment where cannabis users have the latitude and confidence to smoke their pot without worrying that they will be labeled a good-for-nothing pothead. Regardless of how accepting people are of cannabis compared to the past, there remains a dark cloud hanging over the heads of those in Roach’s head shop. They fear losing their jobs, their respect in the community, the love of their loved ones. Perhaps someday Canada will be a country where smoking a joint is no different than sipping from a bottle of beer, where politicians need not lie about smoking pot to protect their polling numbers, where parents do not fear losing their children because of how they spend their time unwinding after a long day’s work.

There are reasons to be optimistic. Roach believes that it will only take 5-10 years before cannabis is as normalized as cigarettes and alcohol. *Reefer Madness* is one of the most panned films of all time, receiving countless parodies, a subversive 1998 musical, and a 2005 film that ridicules the film for its absurdity. Anand Rampersad plans to appeal the family court’s decision,

and is confident he will get shared custody of his sons this time. Some pop culture analysts observe a recent shift away from the “lazy stoner” archetype to more “casual consumer” depictions on TV shows like *Broad City* and *High Maintenance*. And finally, legalization has emboldened many cannabis users with a newfound confidence in who they are.

“I like to call myself a *can-noisseur*,” says Ian Power, “and that’s what I’ll be known for from now on, for the rest of my days. I’m a can-noisseur, not a stupid stoner.”

Terrell Watson

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