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The world won't end or even change much with legalized pot

Two federal parties — the Liberals and the New Democrats — favour the legalization of marijuana. The end of prohibition and the regulated but legal sale and use of marijuana could soon become a reality in Canada.

David Staples

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And you know what? Things will be pretty much the same as they are now. Most of the changes that will occur will be positive.

The government will collect more in taxes, maybe as much as \$5 billion per year if you go by Green party projections. The well-developed marijuana black market will be able to operate above board. Millions of Canadians will try out smoking marijuana and many of them will continue to smoke it regularly, just as happens now. But from what we've seen in other jurisdictions that have decriminalized drugs, such as in Portugal, or legalized marijuana, such as in Colorado and Washington state, there won't be much change in drug use.

In a 2009 study done by the Cato Institute on Portugal's 2001 decriminalization of marijuana, heroin, cocaine and meth, it was found that the number of teenagers who at some point took illegal drugs had fallen: "None of the nightmare scenarios touted by pre-enactment decriminalization opponents — from rampant increases in drug usage among the young to the transformation of Lisbon into a haven for 'drug tourists' — has occurred.

"Data indicate that decriminalization has had no adverse effect on drug usage rates in Portugal, which, in numerous categories, are now among the lowest in the EU, particularly when compared with states with stringent criminalization regimes ... Drug-related pathologies — such as sexually transmitted diseases and deaths due to drug usage — have decreased dramatically."

With the end of prohibition a real possibility here, I talked to a few longtime tokers.

Dean Franken, 51, a clerk at the Dooby Doo head shop who has been regularly toking since he was 15, says he likes that consumers could soon have more information about the marijuana they buy, such as the amount of THC (marijuana's active ingredient) in each specific product. "You take away all the street guys who are putting crap in there that doesn't belong in there just to try to give it that extra edge," Franken says.

Franken believes usage will increase, but he's not worried about that, as we've lived with a problematic drug such as alcohol for generations now. "I was a bartender for years, man, and

(the customers) are your best friend when they came in and then two hours later they want to cut your neck. The alcohol changes the personality very aggressively. Marijuana, the more induced, the more mellow they become. They don't get all hyped up and want to fight."

Colin Rogucki, owner of Shell Shock head shop, says legalization is inevitable here now that prohibition is starting to end in the United States. "The world has changed. We realize people have their vices, but it's better to regulate and move forward. Marijuana is less harmful than alcohol, it's less harmful than tobacco. It's just another vice."

Of course, there's no end to the fears about marijuana, but it's now evident they have been greatly overstated. When I was a teenager, for instance, one of my cleaner-cut buddies warned me that smoking pot would cause "black spots in your sperm." The fearmongering continues to this day with federal Conservative Leader Stephen Harper's curious claim that marijuana is "infinitely worse" than tobacco.

The Portugal experience tells us such rhetoric is overblown. Our own experience tells us the same. It's not like we're unfamiliar with marijuana. Canadians in large numbers have used this drug for decades. Folks who like it are still using it. Most of them are functional adults, while a much smaller percentage struggle with addiction, just as some struggle with alcohol or gambling or harder drug addictions. There's no shortage of addictions in a free society. If you're prone to them, you've no doubt already found an outlet.

The legalization of marijuana isn't the biggest issue in this election, but it does say something that a party like Harper's Conservatives, which is purportedly against big government clamping down on the little guy, still supports prohibition.

The Conservatives are behind the times on this one, out of step with best practice, and also out of step with the libertarian impulse to let people freely choose their own path in life, so long as it doesn't overtly harm others.

Smoking pot should be a personal choice. We're capable of responsibly making that choice, just like the Portuguese have done since 2001.