

Senate Special Committee on Illegal Drugs **DISCUSSION PAPER - SUMMARY**

The **Senate Special Committee on Illegal Drugs** is scheduled to table its report *focusing on cannabis* in August 2002. Before reaching its conclusions and recommendations, the Committee will hold, in May 2002, a series of public hearings across the country to hear Canadians' views. Because opinions on drugs are often based on a lack of rigorous information or on myths, we have prepared this discussion paper to provoke a fruitful dialogue with Canadians across the country,

Based on some of the key elements of the scientific evidence we have gathered this discussion paper aims to *share with you what we have learned so far*. During the past year, we have heard many experts from Canada and other countries tell us what they have learned. We have also requested research reports to gather and analyze existing information. We have examined knowledge from many disciplines, from pharmacology to criminology, law, medicine and psychology. These findings show that :

- **Cannabis is a psycho-active substance and it is therefore better to not use it.**
- **The vast majority of recreational users use cannabis only temporarily and irregularly; approximately 10% become chronic users and 5 to 10% become addicted.**
- **Cannabis use among youth has been increasing in many Western countries over the past years. In Canada, some studies indicate that approximately 30% of youth aged 15-24 have used cannabis in the last year; most are recreational users.**
- **Cannabis may have some negative effects on the health of individuals, but considering the patterns of use, these effects are relatively benign.**
- **Cannabis has very limited effects on public safety insofar as ordinary crime is concerned, however, its illegal status contributes to fuelling organized crime elements. Impaired driving under the sole influence of cannabis has not been established firmly in research although it likely affects driving abilities.**
- **Each year, over 30,000 Canadians are charged by police for simple cannabis possession;**
- **The illegality of cannabis means significant expenditure of public funds, particularly for law enforcement; it also means less information and prevention action is undertaken. Furthermore, public policies appear to have little impacts on patterns of use.**

The Committee thinks that a public policy on illicit drugs should be firmly rooted in well defined basic principles. In the next few months, we will be examining a series of principles around the following five issues:

- What should be the role of scientific information on public policy decisions in respect of illicit drugs, especially in relation to cannabis?
- What should be the role of the State? In particular, what priority should be given to preventative and educational approaches in order to prevent abuse of drugs?
- What is the role of the criminal law? Should it intervene only when demonstrable and significant harm is caused to others?
- What should be the role of public health principles? To what extent should a public policy on illegal drugs seek to reduce the negative impacts of drug abuse on public health?
- What should be the role of ethical considerations? In particular, how important is it that public policies aim at minimizing the negative impacts of public policies themselves (first do no harm)?

During our public hearings, we would like to hear your views on the following questions:

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- 1) Do you agree with the research conclusions we have received? What are your reasons and sources of information?
- 2) Research evidence we have received to date does not appear to support criminalization and penalization of cannabis. Do you share this view?
- 3) Studies appear to indicate that the current policy approach may cause more harm than good. Do you agree? Why?
- 4) It is better for youth not to use cannabis (or to smoke tobacco), yet we also know that youth have and will do so if only because of the rebellion and soul searching of adolescence. Do you think that penal prohibition is the right way to define what is allowed and what is not for youth?
- 5) Should public polices aim to prevent use or minimize the negative consequences of use?
- 6) Studies indicate that more liberal policy approaches have little effect on actually increasing or decreasing use patterns of cannabis. Do you agree? Why?
- 7) If Canada was to adopt a different, more liberal approach to cannabis, should it take into account the reaction of the USA? What would the reaction likely be?
- 8) Some politicians have already indicated that the present public policy regime would not change whatever the conclusions of this Committee or others. What, if anything, should be done to advance this kind of debate? What role should the Senate play?

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