Legalisation debate

Your response should provide a considered discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of both legalisation and criminalisation, which shows evidence of wide and varied reading. Cannabis, through the decades has changed dramatically from being an ancient herbal medicine to an illicit drug. Cannabis originated from Central Asia and was used as a healing agent, during rituals and as a spiritual euphoria. However, in most western countries this drug has been criminalized and made illegal by the Geneva Convention Dangerous Drugs Act (1925).

Australia has decriminalized cannabis in all states since 1987. There has been a heated debate surrounding the legalization of cannabis. In order to further understand the reasoning between both sides I will be looking into the advantages and disadvantages of both the legalization and criminalization of cannabis. There are numerous advantages in legalising cannabis within Australia. Namely the utilitarian line of reasoning that proscription has failed to dissuade cannabis use and the economical and social costs of its continuance outweigh its benefits. Hall, 1997). An advantage of legalising cannabis would facilitate the Australian economy to flourish by enabling the government to create revenue from taxing the cannabis industry. Cannabis is a billion dollar industry and by prohibiting it this money falls into the black market, in turn leaving a damaging impact on the economy. Currently marijuana is a cash crop with one of the highest dollar value yield in agriculture, up to $1250 per acre for the fiber (Oxford Hemp Exchange, 1998).

Also by legalising this drug the government would be able to appropriately control the distribution and sales of how much is consumed by either

increasing or decreasing the tax. The FDA could also regulate the quality and safety of drugs, which is safer than how it is currently in the hands of criminals in the black market. Another advantage of sanctioning cannabis is it permits users to reap the instant and long term medical benefits of marijuana. Cannabis has proven to have significant health benefits such as assisting in pain relief, treating glaucoma and mitigating nausea during chemotherapy treatment.

Critics argue that current policies in place have little effect on deterring people from trying cannabis. Libertarians argue that its is hypocritical to ban cannabis when it is less harmful than alcohol considering that alcohol has been proven to be more addictive and cannabis is " safer than aspirin" (Ellard, 1992) However, similar to alcohol and cigarettes, the government should initiate proper education and training about the benefits and preventative measures that should be used when dealing with this drug.

However, there are many disadvantages associated with legalising cannabis, by making this drug readily available similar consequences of that associated with alcohol and tobacco can arise. Although marijuana has been coupled with numerous medical benefits opponents argue that there are alternative legal prescription drugs treatments that would be as effective as marijuana. Cannabis has also proved to have severe effects on individuals diving skills and by legalising it there is more of a risk of people driving while there high, leading to increase in motor vehicle accidents.

Another disadvantage of legalising cannabis would mean that since it is readily available more people are likely to become addicted. Increasing health risks in society such as schizophrenia and psychotic disorders (Hall,

1998). A study has shown that heavy cannabis use causes a specific " cannabis psychosis" (Hall, 1998) Also currently having this drug illegal does deter a few people provided by the fear of criminal conviction (Hall, 1997).

Cannabis has also been stated to be a " gateway drug" (Fergusson & Horwood, 2000) thus, by legalising cannabis there is more of a chance for user to become addicted to ' harder' drugs such as cocaine and heroin. This is generally because addicts become accustomed to the high they get from marijuana therefore need a stronger drug to get a similar ' hit'. Another disadvantage of legalising cannabis would be that it might fall into the hands of minors, which can severely impact developing brains.

By allowing marijuana to be legal, it increases accessibility to children. Causing children from a young age to become associated with drugs and alcohol, which can lead to criminal activity. (Himmelstein, 1983) Australia currently has criminalized the use, possession and cultivation of cannabis in most states except Australian Capital Territory, Northern Territory and South Australia, which have a less harsh conviction, a fine rather than imprisonment. Theses strict enforcements deter individuals from ever trying cannabis for the first time.

Another advantage of criminalization would be that most drugs related arrests are those who have committed or are likely to commit more serious crimes can be taken off the streets. Most drug users are usually associated with criminal activity. Individuals who either sell, produce, use or traffic drugs aren't likely to be constrained in committing other felonies such as robbery, murder and rape. Therefore, by criminalizing the use of this drug it

reduces the chances of these people being sent free after being caught with a minor drug offence.

Opponents of the legalization of cannabis debate also argue that legalising cannabis will eventually lead to legalising of other harder drugs. Critics argue that this shift will lead to a more accepting mentality of all drugs and contend, " where do you draw the line" (Dennis & White, 1999). However, some argue that the government has no right to ban a natural plant and like alcohol adults should be allowed to make their own decisions. The libertarian viewpoint on legalising marijuana is that prohibition of any recreational drug is an infringement on individual liberty (Szasz, 1985).

From 1991 to 1992 it was estimated that $329 million was spent for police and judicial resources in arresting cannabis offenders. (Marks, 1994). Advocates of legalising cannabis argue that the money spent on enforcing minor drug-related crimes could be better spent on preventing more serious crimes. Another disadvantage of criminalization would be that young children who are caught with minor drug-related offences are left with a criminal record that can severely impact on future job opportunities (Hall, 1997).

Children caught in a drug offence are often trapped in a flawed system that turns them into a lifelong criminal. By criminalizing cannabis even a minor first time offence would put a young child in jail as part of a mandatory sentence. Therefore, others who have committed worse crimes surround the individual, making it more difficult to break from the criminal life. The legalization of marijuana would remove another temptation that could lead a young individual down the wrong road. As stated in " Illicit drug use in

Australia: chapter 4" the 2004 National Household Survey, around one third (33. %) of Australians aged 14 yrs and over reported that they had used cannabis at some point in their lives.