

## We'd be dopes to legalise it

I'm on the herb this week. Sorry, bad pun.

I'm guessing everyone under 80 has a dope story, because if my memory's not too clouded there was little or no talk of it prior to the 60s. It seemed to arrive here with the Rolling Stones, the contraceptive pill, the Vietnam War, long male hair, and rock festivals.

By the 70s, we had a new form of organised crime, whose public profile peaked with the Mr Asia gang and a photo of a prominent lawyer "bathing" in a pile of dollar notes. Or were they hundred dollar notes? Didn't matter...we were shocked no matter what the denomination.

Now, there's no shock. It's just suburban tinny houses, and toleration of whiffs drifting around the bar of your favourite watering hole. The dreaded meth and other stronger and quicker ways to kill yourself have gained public focus.

Does that mean cannabis can now be seen as a smaller evil, nothing more than a variation of legal smoking or any more damaging than alcohol? We're to find out, because the Greenies collected a bonanza ransom from the government it joined – a poll at the next general election.

Labour is accused of cynicism for accepting it as a means to help its age-old problem of getting young people to vote while they're still green enough to be liberal. But I'm wondering if the outcome might resemble Brexit in unintended consequences.

*Wikipedia's* long dissertation on marijuana decriminalisation in the US should be required reading for anyone voting – or writing the ballot paper - on this issue. It shows how a social issue's profile rises, falls and swerves over time, some of the confusion driven by the meaning of words.

Take "decriminalisation". Our poll is likely to offer it as an option, the others being full legalisation or staying illegal. What does the word actually mean? It depends on who's driving its implementation and whether they're guided by legislation or something softer, like an agreed informal convention.

Some US states decriminalised by declaring possession of an ounce of dope was not criminal, or by limiting the fine for an ounce to \$100. Others left it to police and judges to interpret "guidelines" aimed at freeing up courts and jails from an overload of easy-to-make minor dope arrests. That's what's already happened in New Zealand, more or less.

Decriminalising began in the US about the same time dope-smoking started to get popular in New Zealand, and has waxed and waned at the behest of politicians. Conservative Republicans listened to parent (and liquor) anti-dope lobbies, while liberal Democrats loosened the laws.

The same applies here. A Drug Foundation poll (an unreliable phone effort in 2016) showed Labour/NZ First/Green voters were much more in favour of law reform than National supporters.

While more than a dozen US states currently allow dope use in varying degrees up to commercial distribution, the overall federal law still relies on an old, conservative convention that Trump is hoping to get through Congress as new law.

The distinction between a hazy notion of removing criminality and full legalisation for a known avenue to self-harm is crucial. It's not as straight-forward as “cop costs down, health costs up”.

Full legalisation like Uruguay's might remove “glamour” attached to minor law-breaking, but what would await us as big business moved in and the only new retail outlets we saw in town resembled the flash-looking mini-markets for vaping (whose risks are only now emerging)?

I dread to think of the late-night TV ads, full-page magazine spreads, online video productions that pronounced ganga the safest way to get high, better for you than grog, safer than fags.

Warnings would be required, of course – in tiny text as legible and useful as the fine print on medication bottles. The broadcasting and film regulators would impose ratings to “protect” our kids, and they'd be as effective as a surfboard on a lake.

The best popular book produced on this topic in New Zealand was Tom Scott's *The Great Brain Robbery*. It's been around since the 1990s, so nearly a generation has since elapsed for people to get used to the idea we can save money, police efforts and youthful stigma if we adopt a path that ethicists call utilitarian – the best outcome for the greatest number.

Consider the 12 percent - likely to grow with liberalisation - that indulges beyond the odd experimental toke. Unless we're careful, they could be sacrificed for the majority.