



Gov. Corbett's refusal to support medical marijuana defies public opinion and sound rationale

By Antony Davies & James R. Harrigan

Published: Saturday, April 26, 2014 9:00 p.m.
Updated 12 hours ago

When voters are 85 percent in favor of something, politicians typically sit up, take notice and give the people what they want. But not Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Corbett.

According to a Quinnipiac University poll, that large majority of Pennsylvanians are in favor of legalizing medical marijuana. A similar poll conducted at the same time last year by Franklin & Marshall College found 82 percent in favor. But the governor has said that he would veto any legislation legalizing even the medicinal use of the plant.

And now there is pending legislation, authored by conservative Republican state Sen. Mike Folmer. Once a critic of marijuana legalization, Folmer had a considerable change of heart after he was diagnosed with non-Hodgkins lymphoma in 2012. For the first time, a medical marijuana bill in Pennsylvania has growing bipartisan support. That bill, the Compassionate Use of Medical Cannabis Act, would enable adults to possess and use small amounts of marijuana, prescribed by a doctor, to treat a range of illnesses and disorders, including cancer, post-traumatic stress disorder and glaucoma, among others. Children, too, could be treated with the drug with a guardian's consent, most typically (but not exclusively) to alleviate the ill effects of severe seizure disorders, an application which has been life-changing for many in states that have already legalized medical marijuana usage.

So why is Corbett content to stand astride the overwhelming will of the people? His public stance is that changes in drug laws should be undertaken at the federal level. He would have us believe that he is unaware that medical marijuana is legal in 21 states and Washington, D.C. Instead, he deflects attention toward the president, saying this month: "We all know he's admitted to smoking pot in the past. He's had the opportunity to go and tell the FDA (to legalize the drug). Has he done that?"

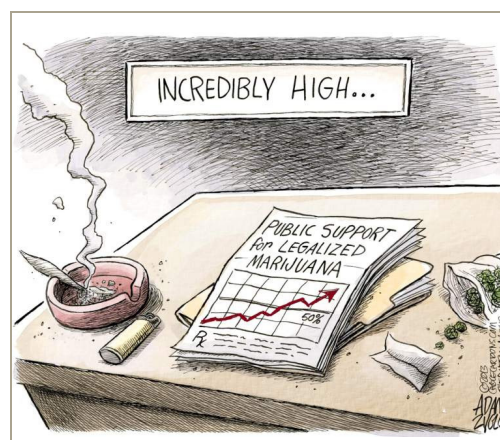
No, but the president's Justice Department has allowed 21 states and the District of Columbia to legalize it without incident. The federal government has spoken loud and clear.

The usual approach at this point would be to ask which entrenched interest groups benefit from the status quo, but oddly, none really do, at least not all that much.

According to the Pennsylvania Uniform Crime Reporting System, there were more than 19,000 arrests for marijuana possession in Pennsylvania in 2012. Of these, 17,000 were cleared — the arrests were expunged, likely because the offenders were eligible for the Accelerated Rehabilitative Disposition (ARD) program, although some of the clearances were undoubtedly the result of successful court challenges.

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Each of the cases that go through ARD can generate between \$500 and \$1,000 in legal fees, plus another \$1,000 or more in fines and fees for substance abuse classes, in addition to required psychological counseling — services that are often provided to counties by private contractors. That makes marijuana's share of Pennsylvania's ARD program worth close to \$35 million annually.

That sounds like a lot of money but in a state with a \$70 billion budget, it is more like a rounding error.

What we have here is nothing more than inertia. We are doing this because this is what we have always done. And that is a terrible reason to do anything. None of the states that has legalized medical marijuana has collapsed. Neither will Pennsylvania.

What will happen? People's suffering will be alleviated. And that is all Tom Corbett should be thinking about.

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