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WILL LEGALIZATION LIGHT UP OR BLOW UP LIBERAL PROSPECTS?

COMMENTS AND OBSERVATIONS BY FRANK GRAVES

[Ottawa – January 26, 2012] The only smoke visible in Liberal Canada these days is coming from the scorched earth of May 2nd. It may therefore not be that surprising that the party would resort to some more pyrotechnic measures to reignite its fortunes. On the surface, the resolution to not just decriminalize but to legalize pot seems more of a Hail Mary than a sound strategic foundation for renewal. But is this really that hazy? When one looks at the longer term patterns of public opinion, and considers the truly available constituencies for the future there may be some cogent pattern in that haze.

First of all, the obvious exposed flanks: 1) in their desperation, the Liberals have gone from serious public policy to a cheap tricks; and 2) marijuana is a the beginning of a serious chain of more profound evils which lead to drug addictions, organized crime, etc. (kind of the updated “Reefer Madness” critique). The first issue is raised among Liberal insiders but there is little evidence that this will raise many eyebrows in a public inured to years of brazen retail politics. If anything, it is the impenetrable vagaries of thoughtful social policies which seem to have left voters cold in recent elections. The Reefer Madness critique will find a home with a serious constituency of voters. The good news for the Liberals is that virtually none of this constituency (older, college not university educated, faith-based, male Anglophones) has shown even a scintilla of interest in Liberal offerings in recent elections.

One of the prime failures of Michael Ignatieff and his team is they believed that they could be appealing as a kinder, gentler alternative to older/boomer voters of this stripe. Clearly, these voter segments are very happy with the current government and any path to Liberal victory lies clearly through under 50 Canada. Throw in seculars and the university educated and you have a more plausible basis for a successful Liberal constituency. Even those who have set aside their pot smoking days will find legalization more attractive than the current Conservative solution of bigger, better Hoosegows in search of a war on drugs playbook that has been rejected in Republican America. Pay for prisons or collect tax revenues on what has been show to be a more benign substance than alcohol and tobacco? Perhaps there is even a tourism angle: come to Canada for ethical pot. The Economist could even dust off that ten year old cover of “Cool Canada” with the sunglass wearing moose (now with bomber in hand/hooft?).

The longer term tracking on attitudes to pot legalization in the United States shows the American public steadily warming to the idea of legalized marijuana. In Canada, the clearer time series data is for decriminalisation which shows an even stronger pattern of growing majority support over the past decade. Recent polling suggests legalization may well enjoy majority support and is more dramatically more popular than the tough on crime approach to marijuana. And therein lays the crux of whether this policy will blow up or light up Liberal prospects. The Liberals desperately

need to lay out emotionally resonant areas of vivid difference which galvanize non-Conservative Canada. Legal pot may be one of the ingredients to such a strategy.