



To take or not to take

Clay Nelson © 20 September 2020

Compared to what is going on in the US, our election season is not filled with much drama or suspense. Thank you, Spirit of Life! Polls suggest that the current government will get another term. The only question is will Labour be able to govern alone or will they need a coalition partner. What suspense there is surrounds the two referendums on the ballot. Considering that each has the potential to be transformational, they have not had nearly the air time of the political decisions most Kiwis seem to have already made.

So, on these last two Sundays before the election I've decided to devote our time together to the referendum questions. Today I am seeking to create space for each of us to inform our conscience by hearing and sharing our common wisdom during an extended breakout session about the cannabis referendum.

I have struggled with how much to share my own views. With the knowledge that in spite of all appearances this is not a binary choice, I understand we will all have experiences and reasons for our ultimate decision. I will share some of mine that inform my conscience. During the breakout I encourage you to share yours.

- As a child of the sixties I experimented with marijuana exactly three times while at university. The last time made me ill. It was a rite of passage for my generation and we all inhaled. Since then my preferred recreational vice was red wine or a single malt if I could afford it.
- For six years I ran very large residence halls of more than a thousand students at two different universities and for four more years I was responsible for all residence life at George Washington University. My staff and I used to joke we could get a contact high just walking the hallways. To this day I find the smell objectionable.
- During that time vandalism, violence and vomit were due solely to alcohol use. Loud music was the only sin of the stoners.
- During that time there were several occasions where I sent students by ambulance to the hospital deathly ill from severe alcohol abuse. I never had a similar experience with a student smoking weed.

- After my move from higher education to ministry I had little direct experience. If I had liked cannabis I chose the wrong faith group. I should have become a Rastafarian.
- But as someone dedicated to social justice, I had a problem with US drug laws and still have a problem with the war on drugs. They were not applied equitably. People of colour were disproportionately sent to prison for marijuana use. As people of colour are disproportionately represented as living at or below the poverty line, they could afford marijuana to relax when they could not afford a single malt, making them an easy target. Criminalising its use is clearly an example of systemic racism.
- Sadly, the situation is similar in New Zealand. About 50% of our prison population is Māori when they only represent just over 16% of the population. A significant percentage of that population have been incarcerated for cannabis use.
- In my experience our drug enforcement efforts would be better served if directed towards those who sell meth, opioids and synthetic cannabis. With resources freed from policing and criminalising cannabis users, we should provide treatment for those who are addicted, remembering addiction is an illness, not a crime.
- Lastly, these laws have a destructive impact on young people of any colour. When I was at St Matthew's I assisted a young white South African immigrant. He was seeking permanent residence here. He was being denied his request because as a teenager he was arrested once for using cannabis. We finally convinced Immigration NZ he was not a risk and would be an asset to our country. But if we had failed, he would have been deported along with his wife and child.

That is how my life experience is influencing how I will vote. I now want to play a video that will detail the issues behind the referendum. I searched for quite awhile to find something informative that was not advocating for a specific outcome and which might be a little bit entertaining. Radio New Zealand posted a video that met those requirements.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8KGxna38Pt8>

My hope is that you now have enough material to discuss the multitude of issues in the breakout and bring our common wisdom forth to inform our conscience.