

No rogue: Scott Reid on the politics and policy of pot

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Conservative MP Scott Reid met with iPolitics' BJ Siekierski at his office on Parliament Hill in Ottawa on Wednesday, December 10, 2014. iPolitics/ Matthew Usherwood

In early October, Conservative MP Scott Reid quietly posted an article on his [website](#) that he wrote in 2001 for *Policy Options* magazine, back when — as a member of the Canadian Alliance — the son of Giant Tiger founder Gordon Reid was a new addition to the opposition benches.

“The recent re-emergence of marijuana legalization as a policy issue has prompted me to republish it here,” he wrote in a short explanatory note. “The original title was, simply, ‘Should We End Prohibition?’”

Sitting in his office in December, on the fourth floor of Parliament Hill’s centre block, Reid — in a gray-green suit and floral tie — was relaxed, though looking a bit tired from a flurry of end of session votes. As he closes the door to his section of the office, he considered a cup of tea — then remembered his staff have just left for the day, and decides against it. He is, after all, through no fault of his own, well over an hour late for the scheduled interview.

In his absence, his staff provided updates on the votes holding their boss up; they were affable, unsuspecting, and gave the impression that the place hasn’t been suffocated by the PMO’s busy tentacles — that Reid’s measured independence has trickled down.

Langevin Block, though only across the street, feels much farther away. Reid’s answer to that 2001 prohibition question — despite what would seem like plenty of recent motivation to change it — remains the same: yes. Like the prohibition of alcohol in the United States in the 1920s, in his eyes the war on drugs — and particularly marijuana — has been a predictable failure.

“I’m always suspicious of people whose ideas don’t evolve at all. (Ralph Waldo) Emerson says ‘Consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds,’ but for the most part the fundamentals are the same,” he paraphrases.

Behind Reid a Lawren Harris-like urban winter scene hangs on the wall. To his left a library so full that a ladder is there to help him reach the books on the top shelves. A quick glance at the titles shows Bob Plamondon’s *Full*

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Circle, Don Martin's biography of Belinda Stronach, a book on Stalin, and another by former Harper advisor Tom Flanagan — a conservative libertarian with whom Reid shares much.

Writing in *The Globe & Mail* in September 2010, Flanagan **argued** that conservatives needed to see that the war on drugs, like the long gun registry, was “profoundly incompatible with their basic values.”

And he identified Reid as one of the “prominent Canadian conservatives” who'd already figured that out.

The Harper government's deputy House leader **since 2006**, Reid still firmly believes the evidence shows that keeping cannabis illegal artificially raises prices, encourages crime, and gets in the way of the safest possible consumption.

But a lot has changed since he wrote that 2001 piece, when the debate was abstract.

“I've had to think, because the nature of the debate has changed in that actual legalization is starting to occur,” he says.

Closest to Canada, four states — Alaska, Colorado, Oregon, and Washington — have legalized the purchase and sale of marijuana; the District of Columbia is trying implement a ballot measure approved in November that would legalize the **possession of small amounts**; and others are moving ahead with **decriminalization**.

With the U.S. federal law — the Controlled Substances Act — still prohibiting sale and distribution, however, the legality question remains in flux; but the trend for proponents is indisputably positive.

“That wasn't true back in 2001, so I've had to think about... how this would actually work in practice. And so I've started to think a little bit about what would be an actual small-c conservative policy for marijuana legalization,” Reid explains.

But something else, closer to home, also makes the current debate more tangible: the fact that a subsidiary of **Tweed Marijuana, Inc.** — a Canadian company licensed to sell medical marijuana and listed on the TSX Venture Exchange — operates in his riding of Lanark-Frontenac-Lennox and Addington out of a former Hershey's Chocolate plant in Smiths Falls, Ontario.

“I went down and met with the folks who run Tweed, and we had a very interesting tour of the place. I'm not actually a pot-user. I've never smoked pot, so I had no idea what a large number of plants in a room smells like,” he says.

“It didn't smell like I thought it would. In the room I was in, it smelled liked grapefruit,” he digressed, impressed by the sophistication of the operation.

Reid pulls some notes out of his desk to remind himself of all the restrictions he thinks should be in place if marijuana is legalized: allowing municipalities to opt out, making the legal age 21, prohibiting sales to non-residents, limiting the amounts that can be sold, preventing it from being sold with alcohol and consumed in public places.

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Conservative MP Scott Reid consults notes at his office on Parliament Hill in Ottawa on Wednesday, December 10, 2014. iPolitics/ Matthew Usherwood

Peculiarly, though, the whole conversation with Reid takes place as if in a vacuum, where his party's virulent criticism of Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau's vague legalization pledge is an afterthought, and his position in no way jeopardizes his standing within the Conservative party.

"If you're asking me, are there disciplinary consequences? Do I think this is inhibiting my career in some manner? Then the answer is 'no,'" he said.

"I first articulated this point of view at a conference of the group Civitas — and the prime minister was in attendance. He wasn't prime minister then, he was a private citizen at the time, but we sat at the same table and then I got up and made my presentation at Tom Flanagan's invitation," Reid explains, almost surprised by the question.

"It's not like this is news to him. He's known this all the way along, and at no point — he didn't, for example, say: 'I feel uncomfortable having you endorsing me because you're the marijuana guy.' There was none of that."

Furthermore, though Reid acknowledges his public position makes him an outlier in the Conservative party, he doesn't think he's alone.

"I think there's more variety of opinion on this subject and every other subject than the nature of partisan politics would tend to reveal. We get pushed into — by the dynamics of this business — into endorsing a party position," he says.

In other words, this isn't Reid going rogue in the lead-up to a federal election; he's just being consistent. That said, he also doesn't see it being an issue for him any time soon, because he firmly believes a government bill would be needed to make the necessary changes. And that's clearly not happening any time soon.

A private members' bill wouldn't do it, and it has to be done right.

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“That would be very hard to do as a practical matter, because you’re talking about legalizing and setting up a regulatory regime,” he says. “You can’t do this with a standard private members’ bill that’s five pages long. It would require quite a substantial piece of legislation. If this is a badly-drafted piece of legislation — full stop.”

From there the conversation finally segued to Justin Trudeau. It took a long time for his name to come up, and it only did because Reid is asked to weigh in. But that provides an opening.

“Oddly enough, I haven’t had a conversation with any — Liberal MPs, anyway — about this. And I have to say, I’m not very impressed by Justin Trudeau’s position. His position was, until 2012: marijuana should be illegal... so he wasn’t in favour of either decriminalization or legalization,” Reid said.

Trudeau’s subsequent admission that he’d **smoked marijuana since becoming a MP** gets Reid a little riled up.

“When you were saying it should be a criminal offence because it is a dangerous substance... you’re saying that, while you were using it, that makes you a hypocrite. That makes Justin Trudeau a hypocrite on this subject,” he says.

“It’s not hypocritical to say, ‘I don’t use it and never have but I think it should be legal, even though I think it is a dangerous substance, because the costs to society of keeping it illegal outweigh the benefits of keeping it illegal,’ which is my position.”

It’s for that reason — the danger — that Reid doesn’t have a problem with the controversial anti-marijuana **Health Canada ad campaign** that Liberals see as partisan trickery.

The campaign suggests, for example, that marijuana can “decrease IQ,” supposedly based on the results of a 2012 Duke University study — the results of which have since **been challenged** by a more comprehensive British report.

The Canadian Medical Association, the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada, and the College of Family Physicians of Canada all declined to be a part of the Health Canada ads, not wanting to be **caught up in the politics**.

Though marijuana can be beneficial for the treatment of certain medical conditions, for the majority of people it’s harmful, Reid argues, and should be portrayed that way.

But that doesn’t mean he’s convinced the ads are effective.

“If I could wave a magic wand and cause tobacco to no longer provide the effect that causes people to use it, I would do it. I would do the same thing with alcohol and with marijuana — I guess I’d like to be able to preserve the benefits in reducing nausea in cancer patients who are going through chemotherapy,” he clarified.

“Other than that, I’d want to. But these are not realistic options. Given that I can’t alter the laws of chemistry, you can alter the laws of the land to cause less damage. And we know that the war on drugs — specifically on marijuana — has not worked.”

