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As the ground on marijuana shifts, Harper turns sensibly to a ticketing option

It only seems sudden, as immense social change often does. The ground is shifting on the prosecution of marijuana possession. It has shifted under no less than the stolid feet of Prime Minister Stephen Harper, who, when asked last week by a reporter if he has smoked marijuana, replied, “Do I seem like I smoke marijuana?” Mr. Harper says he is giving careful consideration to a sensible proposal from the Canadian Chiefs of Police that would allow police to give tickets for marijuana possession.

Separately, the United States, home of the perpetual war on drugs, has announced that the two states whose residents voted last year to legalize marijuana may do so without being challenged by the federal government. Those states, Colorado and Washington, plus 18 others that have approved marijuana for medical use, will still need to make sure the drug isn’t sold to minors, that revenues don’t end up in the hands of gangs or cartels, that drugged driving will be prevented and that marijuana will not be grown on public lands.

As the U.S. justice department said in a memo to those 20 states, it still holds the opinion that marijuana is a dangerous drug and the illegal distribution of it is a serious crime, but it also says that prosecutorial resources should be used where most needed. It’s a good position for Mr. Harper to take. Canada prosecutes 50,000 people a year for marijuana possession and spends hundreds of millions of dollars doing so. Moreover, as the Canadian police chiefs say, those prosecutions may saddle people with criminal records limiting their job or travel prospects.

The shifting ground shows why we really don’t need to know whether Mr. Harper, Justin Trudeau or any other politician has smoked dope. That discussion is decades out of date, and besides, most politicians won’t challenge a taboo. Until Mr. Harper’s comment on the police chiefs’ idea, it was no more possible for a federal Conservative to speak candidly about pot use than it would have been for Mr. Trudeau to look unworldly in his socially enlightened set by saying he had never done so. It’s all about as believable as when Bill Clinton said he didn’t inhale.

The only answer we thoroughly enjoyed was the one from a laughing Toronto Mayor Rob Ford – “I’ve smoked a lot of it.” It was an authentic moment, finally, that spoke volumes about where the public stands on this drug.