



In this Aug. 19, 2011, file photo, a participant holds up a bag of marijuana during the first day of Hempfest, a gathering of thousands of people at Myrtle Edwards Park in Seattle. Police chiefs meeting in Winnipeg say handing out tickets for illegal possession of marijuana may be more efficient than laying criminal charges. (JOSHUA TRUJILLO/THE CANADIAN PRESS)

Globe editorial

Harper should listen to Canada's police chiefs on tickets for pot smoking 7

Last updated Wednesday, Aug. 21 2013, 8:00 PM EDT

The call by Canada's police chiefs to allow officers to ticket people found in possession of small amounts of marijuana is both welcome and innovative. It may be a matter of semantics, but the recommendation from the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police could be a way of finding a workable middle ground in the heated and drawn-out debate over the decriminalization of pot.

Many would argue that the chiefs' proposal to "enhance enforcement options" amounts to decriminalization. Their recommendation calls on Ottawa to use the Federal Contraventions Act to add a ticketing option to the part of the Controlled Drug and Substances Act that governs simple pot possession. (The Federal Contraventions Act allows provincial and municipal police to issue tickets for federal offences, mostly in the area of marine law and wildlife protection law.)

The upshot would be that police across Canada who encounter an individual smoking a joint in a park would no longer be limited to arresting the suspect, thereby adding one more body to a justice system already overloaded by minor pot offences, or letting the person off with a warning. Instead, the officer could issue a ticket with a fine attached to it. The suspect would not be saddled with a criminal record for an offence most Canadians do not consider grave, but he or she would still be on the hook for ignoring the law.

The best option would be to decriminalize the possession of small amounts of pot, as several U.S. jurisdictions have done (two states recently went further, legalizing it). We are past the era in North America where pot-smoking is considered a moral offence or a threat to society's well-being. The majority of Canadians have consistently supported the decriminalization – and even the legalization – of marijuana possession in recent polls.

They are at odds, however, with a tough-on-crime federal government that is determined to punish and incarcerate pot users.

The police chiefs' proposal reinforces that it is the federal government, not the Canadian public, that is out of step with the times. The chiefs deserve congratulations for pressing forward with this debate and offering a way past the federal government's intransigence.