

# "Mary-Jane": the Rodney Dangerfield of the back forty

*Commentary by Hugh Maynard*

There is no doubt that if Bob Hamon had been talking about flax or switchgrass or some other kind of non-edible fibre plant, his plea would not have made headlines in the *Globe & Mail*; because Hamon's *cause célèbre* is the devil's weed - marijuana - his proposition and supporting arguments are receiving wide-exposure in the media.

Hamon, a carpenter from Ormstown, Quebec, wants the Dangerous Drug Directorate of Health & Welfare Canada to issue a permit allowing him to grow Indian hemp, a.k.a. cannabis, pot, Mary-Jane and a lot of other appropriately descriptive names. Restricted under the Narcotics Control Act since 1923, no permit has previously been issued, therefore making the growing of Indian hemp illegal, a crime for which Mr. Hamon has been twice convicted (currently under appeal.)

Before both the responsible federal government department and the Canadian courts, Hamon is maintaining that the restriction on growing Indian hemp is unwarranted and is, in fact, denying Canadian society access to a potentially useful crop. There are different varieties of hemp, each with its own particular attributes; some contain high levels of THC, the ingredient that gives marijuana its' intoxicating effect, while others contain much lower levels, effectively making the plant unattractive for illicit purposes.

It is these low-level THC varieties that Hamon would like a permit to grow, as well as a liberalization of the laws governing the use of hemp in general. Hemp, before the advent of nylon, was the main source of fibre for making rope; with modern technology, the plant can now also be used as an alternative material for textiles (e.g. feed sacks), cardboard and even paper.

Hemp varieties low in THC could once again be cultivated on a wide basis as a crop for industrial use: well-suited to the same conditions in which tobacco is grown, Canadian farmers would have an alternative besides government hand-outs when trying to phase out the other 'weed'; it is estimated that one acre of hemp can produce the same amount of pulp for paper as ten acres of trees, making the plant's cultivation on even marginal land an economic as well as an environmental consideration; there is also the untapped potential of oil from the seeds and bio-fuel from the stems, and all this with little concern about the mood-altering abilities of the leaves and flowers.

Jacques Proulx, president of Quebec's Union des producteurs agricoles (UPA), mentioned these points in a March letter to Minister of State for Agriculture, Pierre Blais, who is also Minister of Justice. The UPA wants to be able to tap the advantages of low-THC varieties for the province's farmers, to get them into a market that has recently been recognized in Britain, France and Spain with changes to these countries regulations governing the production of hemp.

As a self-admitted and long-time consumer of cannabis for personal reasons, Hamon's assertions are likely to be clouded by the suspicion that his quest for the legal and less-restricted cultivation of hemp is merely a camouflage for being able to practice some less detectable inter-row seeding of more enticing varieties; such misgivings will certainly be foremost in defense of the status quo.

However, Mr. Hamon has a just cause, one that is bolstered by increasingly public support from organizations like the UPA. That support is based on a rational analysis of the potential benefits of an industrial crop managed in a responsible manner, which is quite possible, and not with a view to an illicit market as with the cultivation of poppies in Asia.

It is unfortunate that few have paid attention to the beneficial economic and environmental possibilities of hemp until it was given a little sex appeal, a flirtation with an illicit affair; imagine national newspapers headlining the agricultural prospects of cannabis with "Resurrected industrial crop reaps farmer rewards". Just can't get no respect.

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