

Pot tax 'bonanza' excludes Indigenous

Senate committee studying proposed law comes to city

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The **Senate committee** tasked with studying the effect of cannabis legalization on Indigenous Peoples met Friday in Winnipeg to hear testimony from local experts on health and child welfare.

"The big question that some of us have is whether or not Indigenous communities across Canada have been adequately engaged and consulted about Bill C-45," said Sen. **Daniel Christmas**, who is Mi'kmaw from the Membertou First Nation in Nova Scotia and sits as a member of the Independent Senators Group.

In response to his own inquiries, Christmas said, federal departments told him they had consulted with national Indigenous organizations.

"But it seemed to me that they never really engaged with communities," he said in an interview.

"So, that's where my concern is, that the level of engagement with Indigenous people shouldn't be just at the national organization level, it should be at the community level as well."

Christmas said he'd heard a mix of concerns and hopefulness about cannabis legalization from Indigenous people.

"It's an interesting combination of issues, where on one hand, people are worried about the social consequences of legalizing cannabis, and on the other hand, they see this as an economic opportunity that could increase the level of prosperity on First Nations," Christmas said

The standing **Senate committee on Aboriginal Peoples** is one of five committees tasked with examining Bill C-45 from various perspectives and proposing possible amendments.

On Thursday, the bill passed a Senate vote that will ensure those committees get a chance to study the bill further before going to a third and final vote, expected on or before June 7.

One area of interest for the committee, Christmas said, is why the proposed federal excise tax on cannabis sales - a portion of which is being shared with provincial and municipal governments - won't be shared with Indigenous governments, as well.

Those governments will face new costs for policing and education in their communities after legalization, he said.

"And where's that money going to come from?" Christmas asked.

Friday's meeting was held in the vaulted atrium of Winnipeg's Neeginan Centre, and followed an earlier meeting in which senators heard from local Indigenous leaders about "the new relationship between Canada and First Nations, Inuit and M tis peoples."

In an interview, Conservative Sen. **Dennis Patterson** echoed his colleague's concern.

Indigenous people have "been left out of the excise tax bonanza," said the former premier of the Northwest Territories, who represents Nunavut in the Senate.

Patterson recently returned from a tour of 25 communities across Nunavut, where he met with local leaders and citizens to discuss cannabis legalization. He described the trip as an eye-opener.

On a visit to the remote community of Resolute Bay, he said, he spoke to cannabis users who reported paying as much as \$100 a gram for the drug.

In cities in southern Canada, \$10 a gram is a more typical price.

Some Nunavummiut, Patterson said, told him they welcomed legalization because they are "getting ripped off by drug dealers."

Others told him they felt cannabis was "better than alcohol."

"I'm not saying there was a unanimous chorus of opposition," Patterson said.

But concerns about addiction - and a lack of addiction treatment options in far-flung northern communities - were a common theme on his trip, Patterson said. Northerners who need addiction treatment need to travel far away from their families to get that help, and Patterson said he'd like to see cannabis legalization include some kind of funding for treatment facilities in Nunavut.

"We need to develop our own community wellness programs," he said.

"We have elders, we have the ability to take care of our own people in our own language, but we need support to develop these programs before you lay another threat to our vulnerable social fabric on top of (the) residential schools' legacy, the dog slaughter, the alcohol problem, the suicide problem. There's going to be impacts, negative impacts from easy access to marijuana."

Sen. **Mary Jane McCallum** said she's concerned about how legal cannabis might complicate other struggles faced by Indigenous people in Canada, like a lack of access to health care, substance addictions, missing and murdered women and sex trafficking.

"Right now, we need our youth to be looking towards their role as change activists," said McCallum, who represents Manitoba as a member of the Independent Senators Group.

"And I think this will be just one more lure away from that responsibility, and that the effects of marijuana are not fully known even now. And yet, they're rolling out the possibility that it will become law, so that really causes me great, great concern."

A "public health approach" to legalization, McCallum said, might reduce the likelihood Indigenous youth want to use cannabis.

"You're looking at, how do we keep the youth busy in a positive way?" McCallum said.

Keeping children engaged is one possible way to reduce youth drug use, said a family physician who testified in front of the **Senate committee** Friday. And cannabis legalization, he said, could help achieve that goal.

"I think the idea that cannabis restriction or cannabis criminalization keeps youth from using cannabis is incorrect," said Dr. Ian Whetter, who serves as the medical program adviser with the University of Manitoba's Ongomiizwin Health Services.

"The youth are using cannabis."

Keeping drugs such as cannabis illegal, Whetter said, "can keep people from using substances in the safest way possible," in addition to creating a black market.

"In doing that, drug laws definitely, disproportionately, result in the incarceration of Indigenous people," he said.

"I think that there's something much more positive that we can imagine, and this is what they've done in Colorado and Washington, where by regulating cannabis sales... they've been able to take the profits from cannabis tax and turn it into programming for youth."

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