

August 17th 2018

Getting ready for medicinal Cannabis

Introduction

The ULP administration led by Prime Minister Dr. Ralph Gonsalves, is poised to create history here in St. Vincent and the Grenadines with the plans to create a medicinal cannabis industry in the State. There has been a great deal of discussion on this matter, and more or less, societal groups and organisations have staked out their positions on this issue. The ULP has clearly stated a policy in regard to medicinal cannabis, following serious research, and consultations with related bodies.

It is well known that the growth and use of cannabis in this country is illegal. Under the laws of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, there are serious penalties for persons who are convicted for trafficking in cannabis or marijuana, as it is also called. A similar situation applies to those persons who smoke cannabis, although in recent times the police has been fairly liberal in the way they handle situations where a small amount of cannabis is involved.

Still this situation is a complex one, and requires strong leadership skills and guidance. There are those of us in the society who would love to see a radical change, a sort of “freeing up of the herb”, and there are those in the opposition NDP who have advocated this irresponsible position. It is true to say that medicinal cannabis is a growing industry worldwide, and that the ULP administration is within its rights to try and capitalize on this. But the country cannot be reckless, since there are international conventions which control the development of medicinal cannabis. That is why the ULP administration has been very cautious in its approach.

The ULP is also mindful that as a conservative society, there is a negative stigma in relation to marijuana, particularly among church groupings. In fact, Prime Minister Dr. Ralph Gonsalves has already pointed out that sixty two percent of the persons who responded to a recent poll do not support the decriminalization of cannabis for recreational purposes.

What therefore is the approach of the ULP administration?

The Medicinal Cannabis Bills

The ULP administration has drafted three Bills for the development and regulation of the medicinal cannabis industry in the State. These Bills will go before the House

of Assembly at the next meeting, for their first reading. Thereafter, they will go before select committees for more discussion, before the second and third readings in the House.

The first Bill, the Medicinal Cannabis Industry Bill 2018, will regulate the supply, possession and use of the cannabis for medicinal purposes, as this relates to the treatment of persons. It will provide for the setting up of a Medicinal Cannabis Authority, and the Medicinal Cannabis Advisory Council, as part of the regulatory process. Certain conditions will be established for those persons who wish to grow cannabis for medicinal purposes, and there will be conditions set up for local and foreign investors to become involved in the industry.

The second Bill is called the Permitted Use of Cannabis for Religious Purposes bill, 2018. This Bill will decriminalize the use of cannabis as a sacrament in the religious practices of such bodies, as prescribed by the relevant minister of government. This is good news for persons of the Rastafarian faith who regard cannabis as important to their religious events at their place of worship. So that these groups could seek permission from the relevant minister, to use cannabis at a declared place of worship, or event. Naturally certain conditions will have to be observed before permission is granted.

The third Bill is the Cannabis Cultivation Amnesty Bill which will provide for a period of amnesty, from August 1st 2018 to July 31st 2019. Of course the House of Assembly may make a resolution adjusting this period. This is important for those persons who want to surrender their illegal cultivation of cannabis, so as to avoid prosecution under the law.

The three Bills have been posted to the governments web site www.gov.vc and the amnesty bill and the bill permitting the use of cannabis for religious purposes, have been printed in the Searchlight newspaper. The government has embarked on a communication plan so as to generate debate on the Bills, and the medicinal cannabis industry.

Despite all this, it is important that our young people conduct as much research as possible, so as to obtain information on the benefits of a modern medicinal cannabis industry. It is important to note that worldwide, a number of countries are pursuing activities to start a medicinal cannabis industry. These include Belgium, Canada, Holland, Germany, Italy, Israel and the Czech Republic, to name a few.

Conclusion

St. Vincent and the Grenadines will come under the international microscope when the full programme to develop a medicinal cannabis is revealed. There are several

international conventions which will guide the ULP administration, including the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, as amended in 1975. This is a critical document which applies to ALL countries, particularly those who want to invest in the medicinal cannabis industry, or those who want to become involved in the recreational cannabis industry.

Of course we know that there are detractors, particularly those in the NDP, who will attempt to place obstacles in the way of the ULP's march towards establishing a vibrant medicinal cannabis industry, but as the Rasta brethren would say "fire fuh them!"