

Fletch, Vaughn and Megan Cannabis Referendum Interview of Chlöe Swarbrick

Vaughan [00:00] There is a referendum as part of this year's general election, and it is whether or not, correct me on the exact wording (and studio guest Chlöe Swarbrick). But it is to decriminalize.

Chlöe [00:12] No.

Vaughan [00:14] Legalize.

Chlöe [00:16] Yes, it is to legalize and control and regulate cannabis.

Vaughan [00:18] Right. Okay. So what does that mean?

Chlöe [00:21] So essentially it recognizes.

Vaughan [00:23] First of all, sorry. Good morning. It is a pleasure to have you in studio.

Chlöe [00:28] Thanks, mate. I am. It's a pleasure to have you in here, sir. I know. So basically it recognizes that the status quo is 80 percent of New Zealanders will have used cannabis by the time they are 21 years old. Most people will do that while they are at high school. Now, I have no idea of the potency of this stuff.

Chlöe [00:44] And, you know, of course, drug dealers don't check ID. Then you add to that the fact that approximately half a million New Zealanders are using on an annual basis. We have no control over any of this. We have no idea where it's happening and where people are experiencing problems. We have no ability to intervene in that problematic usage. So this is about attempting to lay a framework of control, regulation, and interventions for help where people need it.

Vaughan [01:07] Now, here's an interesting thing. You could have just been describing alcohol, which is perfectly legal.

Chlöe [01:11] Oh, funnily enough.

Chlöe [01:13] So the Greens are actually the only party that have a consistent line on alcohol, cannabis, and tobacco. So, funnily enough, in 2014, there was a report chaired by Graham L(owe) great rugby legend, which recommended to the then national government that we should remove advertising and sponsorship for alcohol so that we shouldn't be glamorising and normalising the substance as we do, which

has resulted in the proliferation of harm. So, you know, National & Labour have been unwilling to touch that with a bargepole because alcohol lobby is pretty bloody strong. But the Greens have said, you know, and if we're going to be consistent about this, we're going to reduce harm through regulation, there are a number of different levers that you can pull in the spectrum between making something illegal where by you have no control over, it's completely within the black market. Whereas when you make something legal, you're able to say this is what it takes to provide it. These are the people who are allowed access it. These are the kinds of warning labels you need, whether you're able to advertise or sponsor or whatever [for] those we're saying, no advertising, no sponsorship, no public consumption and a purchase age of 20 for cannabis.

Chlöe [02:13] And we theoretically could be doing the same thing with alcohol.

Vaughan [02:17] So it could be. That's kind of what smoking is.

Vaughan [02:20] Cigarettes. Tobacco has now is not allowed to sponsor sports.

Chlöe [02:25] And this is my favourite part of the argument actually. Because I get head up by some interesting conservative figures. Quite often about how, you know, "Why are we looking to legalise cannabis when we are looking to be smoke free 2025." Mate, do you know how we got anywhere close to smoke free 2025? How we reduced the cool factor of it? How we educated young people, particularly about the harms, how we created cessation treatment so people could get off it? How we did all of these wraparound services? Reduced where it could be sold. Etc. You've got taxation levers through legal regulation. You don't get that when it's in the black market.

Vaughan [03:01] Right. So you're saying the legalisation of it makes it far easier to control?

Chlöe [03:05] Yeah, totally. And that's why it's called the Cannabis Legalisation and Control Bill. It is 170 pages....

Chlöe [03:14] But I think one of the things that folks are interested in kind of getting really key top line points you can just go to referendums, dot gov dot nz . And there are some nice bullet points in there.

Vaughan [03:25] Right, like a little PowerPoint.

Chlöe [03:27] It's not quite that pretty.

[03:28] You could sit down because I'd imagine there'd be lots of people on a different generational field to their parents and their parents might be maybe more conservative and just think this is terrible.

Chlöe [03:39] Interestingly their parents are the ones who were part of the hippie generation who are actually responsible for the proliferation of cannabis.

Vaughan [03:43] So, yeah, "they were like, oh, no, now that we've done it, I don't think it's a good idea that anybody else should. <laughter> issue, which is.

Megan [03:50] And how they did it, they don't want their kids doing it.

Chlöe [03:52] Totally. Well, I mean, this is another classic that I get hit with. Oh, it's not the wacky becky from back in my day. It's way more potent now. And it's like, well, that's because it's unregulated, mate. You have no control over the potency.

Chlöe [04:03] If you want to actually create controls over potency, if you want people to be informed about the impacts of their usage, put labelling on it. You don't get that in the black market. And what we've seen is consistent levels of use under illegality over the past few decades.

Vaughan [04:19] So that would be when you would buy, say it becomes legal, you would buy it, it would tell you, you would, you would have that sort of information on the packaging?

Chlöe [04:28] Totally. And there would be limitations as to how much you could buy. So one of the really funny things, because I've got really into the weeds, excuse the pun, there's gonna be a lot of awful puns this year, that I got really into the detail on this legislation.

Chlöe [04:43] I knew next to nothing about drug law reform before I came into parliament. It wasn't a passion of mine, but I actually got really charged up because I realised that politicians were just using it as this way to kind of have a crack at people without engaging in the substance. And I thought it was kind of the most worst use of their power. You know, particularly because you nowadays have most politicians on record as having used cannabis back in the mists of time, but now they're quite willing to oversee a law that criminalises, penalises, and ruins the futures of people who are doing exactly the same thing that they did.

Vaughan [05:14] Right. Yeah. And so what sort of if this passes, so it would get legalised, presumably, if it gets legalised, then, is there a committee that would decide the rules around it, the age restrictions?

Chlöe [05:27] And so there's an agency which will be established and which is the Cannabis Control Agency.

Chlöe [05:31] And they will essentially have delegated power through the Ministry of Health to oversee the way that this rolls out. What we are looking at introducing is actually quite different to what you have in the likes of Canada and definitely quite different to the far more commercial models in the likes of Colorado and other US states. Somewhere between actually Canada and Uruguay. But I'll get outside of the jurisdictional comparisons. So basically, your experience as a Day-To-Day person would be you would know where the shops are. The shops aren't allowed to go like hone advertising out the side, and there won't be neon lights talking about like getting the ganja or whatever.

Chlöe [06:09] Instead, it would just be quite sensible. And in fact, the aim here is to make cannabis boring. It's just supposed to be another alternative for how people may engage in recreation or otherwise.

Chlöe [06:18] But we put, to my original point, purchase limits on how much you can purchase on a daily basis. And the reason for that is that's obviously one of the important things around harm reduction is you want to say you can't buy to massive amounts of excess. And then all of a sudden I had, you know, different news media commentators saying it's like the size of a grapefruit. That's how much cannabis you could buy. And I was like, no one's talking about the fact that you can buy unlimited bottles of vodka and, you know, go home and hone them. But because we started the conversation about what control looks like, people are having these really perverse conversations about what you could potentially do. But actually, what we're talking about here is creating a framework where adults, because you can only purchase that over the age of 20, get to make informed decisions because there will be labelling. There will be requirements. When you go in there, there will be duty's of care on the person who is supplying it. They get to make informed decisions about what they do with their lives.

Vaughan [07:16] And we'll get some sweet tax dollars from it, won't we.

Chlöe [07:19] I mean to the tunes of hundreds of millions of dollars. And we've also provided for in the draft legislation ring-fencing for that to go immediately into health services. Right. And this is the other thing that I really want to touch on, because, I also get hit up about by a lot of people about the mental health stuff. And we know for a fact based on actually fun fact, New Zealand has the best research on cannabis in the world in terms of the longitudinal impacts on people's lives. So there's some studies out of Christchurch and Dunedin which followed people for

decades, up to 40 years. And looking at their consumption of illicit substances and licit being alcohol. And what we've seen is that the majority of people can use cannabis and not experience problems, but a small minority do. When that small minority do, you don't want them to be doing so in a way that nobody knows what's going on. Because right now we have a status quo of effectively chaos. We've got unknown people in unknown places consuming substances of unknown quality to unknown effect. Whereas if you have all of this happening in the light for lack of a better term, where you are able to trace that kind of usage, any potential problems that come up. But also you have a duty of care on the person who's selling it, like a bartender who can't serve you when you're heavily intoxicated, then all of a sudden you have opportunity to intervene in those problems. And that is the point. We have to talk about mental ill health and cannabis in the same kind of vein. And legalisation isn't about throwing stuff from the rooftops. Legalisation is about setting a sense of control, a framework where we are able to go, "Here, you're an adult, O.G., or here you're experiencing problems, let's help you."

Vaughan [08:54] Right. And then, I suppose if you take away the illegal nature of it, if a teenager does have questions, like with booze at the moment, you could have a red wine with mom and dad at home. You know, but you couldn't say to mom and dad hey, I'm thinking about trying this because it's illegal.

Chlöe [09:12] Well, you also couldn't seek to have that. And funnily enough, there's a lot of research out of particularly the States around the DEAR programme on this.

Chlöe [09:19] And so what we know is that younger people, when they are taught something from kind of an abstinence based position, that being just don't do it, you will get pregnant, you'll die. Um, then the kind of outcome becomes, you know, people around them end up engaging in this, whether it's at parties or whatever. And when you're younger, you're more inclined to engage in risky behaviour. That risky behaviour, I don't believe should result in you having a criminal conviction which ruins your opportunity to employment, education, and travel in the future I.E. your entire life. But these young people try this thing because they're in this environment where they feel like other people are doing whatever and then they realise that actually it perhaps wasn't that bad. And then they go, what else are adults lying about it. <laughter>

Chlöe [10:01] You know, but in all seriousness. What is what is the serious

Chlöe [10:05] And someone actually hit me up as well about, "how do I have this conversation with my 16 year old kid?" The same way you have those hard conversations around things like sex education, actually, and through moving from an abstinence based kind of model of sex education through to a serious here is kind

of the birds and the bees and here's what consent and, you know, adult relationships, healthy adult relationships look like. We've moved into a space where we have less teenage pregnancies and less kind of problems that are occurring in the shadows. And young people feel inclined to reach out if they think that they're experiencing problems. Take it out of the shadows, put it in the light, and let's just be grownups about it.

Vaughan [10:39] I always feel, Bill, is how I am going to explain this to my kids. Just really don't want to have to talk to the kids. How am I suppose to

Vaughan [10:47] explain to men holding hands to my child. Very easy,

Vaughan [10:51] you just start talking and don't go at it with any bias and he'll be absolutely fine.

Vaughan [10:57] Thanks for coming in. A very informative chat. And as you say, it's not just, I can say this

Vaughan [11:04] people in this building who do just imagine it's just going to be legal and be far friendlier.

Megan [11:09] Open the floodgates

Chlöe [11:10] Well, it's funny because the floodgates are already open, Mike. And I mean, that's that's the reality. He can talk to his kids, say, can you know that our young people are currently 80 percent of New Zealanders will use this by the time they're 21 years old. Most of them will do it while they're at high school. We have and they won't talk to their parents about it because it's illicit. And it seems more fun and interesting because it's illegal. When you take it out of the shadows, you put some pretty boring regulations in place. All of a sudden, you take away the sugar sexiness of it and we're able to have grown-up conversations about what it means to become intoxicated and the impacts that that can have on the people around you.

Vaughan [11:47] Fantastic.

Megan [11:47] That makes sense.

Vaughan [11:49] Brilliant, thanks so much.

Chlöe [11:50] You got it, mate.