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[April 18, 2007]

CANADA: U.S. SEEKS EXTRADITION OF VANCOUVER'S 'PRINCE OF POT'

(English IPS News Via Thomson Dialog NewsEdge)
VANCOUVER, Canada, Apr. 17, 2007 (IPS/GIN) — A Canadian advocate of legalizing marijuana is waiting to learn whether he will be extradited to the United States to be tried on charges stemming from his lucrative, internet-based marijuana-seed business.

The decision about the extradition of Marc Emery, the marijuana advocate, is scheduled to occur at a high-profile hearing on May 28.

The upcoming extradition hearing highlights the incongruity of Canadian and U.S. drug legislation — Canada's relatively liberal drug laws have regularly irritated U.S. authorities.

Emery consented to an interview in the Vapor Lounge, also known as the People's Lounge, of the British Columbia Marijuana Party. Located in the Cannabis Culture Store on Hastings Street in Vancouver, the lounge is full of people.

Emery is watching his hometown team playing the Dallas Stars in the first round of professional ice hockey's Stanley Cup playoffs.

There are about a dozen people hanging out and smoking up. I am offered some British Columbian hash, but politely decline. The Canucks are up by two goals in the third period.

The air is electric and everyone breathes together between the pauses of the hockey announcer.

The number on the Canucks hockey jersey that Emery is wearing is 420, referring to April 20, the date of the annual marijuana legalization rally. He is expecting 7,000 people at the Vancouver Art Gallery to be smoking "reefers" in full public view as a protest against drug prohibition laws this week.

Known as "The Prince of Pot" or "The King of Cannabis," the self-described libertarian's modus operandi has been to publicly and unapologetically lampoon proponents of the zero-tolerance drug war.

If he is a Canadian "Tony Montana" (the drug lord made famous by actor Al Pacino in the film "Scarface"), he certainly carries no weapons, has no security detail and is as affable as the local bartender. In an age of media spectacle, he is a genius of the satirical gesture.

"DEA (U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration) agents watched too many episodes of Miami Vice when they were young," Emery says.

Much of the profit from Emery's business empire have been used

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to fund pro-legalization activities, such as publishing Cannabis Culture magazine, founding the Hemp BC (British Columbia) Legal Assistance Center, the Little Grow Store, the Cannabis Cafe and initiating POT.TV, an internet-based television program.

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All of these businesses were operating under full public view of Canadian authorities as legal entities or "grey zones" that were not enforced despite Emery's 11 marijuana-related convictions.

But it would be unfair to simply characterize Emery as just some shady drug dealer from British Columbia. He is a civil-liberties activist, marijuana legalization troubadour and head of the Marijuana Party, which garnered 3.2 percent of the popular vote in the 2001 British Columbia provincial election.

Emery quit high school after run-ins with teachers and went on to open his own bookstore in London, Ontario, at the age of 17. From this outpost, he led dozens of freedom crusades, including campaigns against Sunday store-closure laws, in defense of hate literature, pornography and his right to sell sexually explicit music by the group 2 Live Crew. He ran a 23-day emergency garbage service during a civic strike, drawing the ire of labor unions.

During the 2001 provincial election in British Columbia, as one of the leaders of the region's Marijuana Party, he rented a campaign bus that had previously been used on campaigns by former U.S. presidents Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan, and by Jesse Ventura, a professional wrestler who was elected governor of the U.S. state of Minnesota. Emery used the loudspeakers of the newly dubbed "Canna-bus" to protest his exclusion from a televised debate of party leaders during the election campaign.

He claims his latest legal woes began after heckling U.S. drug czar John Walters at a 2002 Vancouver Board of Trade event that he wrangled his way into, including orchestrating a photo op with the U.S. official.

The Prince of Pot is philosophical about his upcoming court date, and prefers to look at it as the culmination of his life's activities as a legalization advocate.

"Young people have positive attitudes and are deprived of things in daily life, exposed to bad things, bad desires and can be overcome by a sense of helplessness," Emery says. "Prohibition and drug laws can further penalize people for taking drugs that help them deal with the realities of daily life."

He hangs his head as the Dallas Stars score a goal, closing the gap to one.

He is full of criticism of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration and its role in his arrest.

"When they raided my house and my store, they found \$12 — no drugs, no weapons, no records. I think it is safe to say that I hardly fit in to the pantheon of international drug lords," he says, adding that television talk-show host "Lou Dobbs called me the largest drug trafficker in world history on CNN."

"You can get executed for selling 132,000 pounds of marijuana in the United States," he says.

When I ask his opinion about George W. Bush's foreign policy and approach to the drug war, Emery says he would like to wring the president's neck because "Canada is becoming a vassal state."

The Dallas Stars score again and the game is tied. Emery hits his hand against his head in dismay.

Though Emery has been selling marijuana seeds for close to a decade, he has never been convicted for it in Canada. His magazine is sent to all the members of the Canadian Parliament and his latest issue is being sent to every member of the U.S. House of Representatives.

As he takes me downstairs to his headquarters in the basement,

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he shows me the envelopes addressed to U.S. politicians, introduces me to his wife and shows me the latest issues of Cannabis Culture. The magazine's cover has a photo-montage array of famous personalities from the music world, such as Bob Marley, Willie Nelson, Yoko Ono; actors such as Woody Harrelson, Tommy Chong, Daryl Hannah; and even U.S. presidential candidate Dennis Kucinich standing in front of the U.S. House of Representatives. They are carrying signs that say "Bongs Not Bombs" and a fake banner that says "Legalize It." There is a makeshift television studio for recording shows for POT.TV.

The third period is over. The game is headed into overtime.

In an editorial for Cannabis Culture, Emery calls attention to "outrageously long prison sentences, brutal law enforcement, and families torn apart."

The editorial continues by claiming that "in 35 years of this war on cannabis and drugs, the prison population in the United States went from 196,092 in 1972 to a disgusting 2,320,359 in 2005, a 12-fold increase in the short span of two generations."

Former Vancouver mayor and now Senator Larry Campbell, seen as a centrist with leftward leanings, said, "This whole trial is much ado about nothing. If Marc Emery is the worst criminal we've got in Vancouver that the U.S. is interested in going after, then I must say we've got to be doing pretty well. It seems to be a bit of an overreaction to get the full weight of the U.S. government bearing down on you for selling pot seeds. The [Drug Enforcement Administration] is like a paramilitary organization when it's run by a right-wing government."

Emery was arrested in Halifax, Nova Scotia, on July 29, 2005, after a U.S. federal grand jury indicted him on charges of conspiracy to distribute marijuana seeds, conspiracy to distribute marijuana and conspiracy to engage in money laundering. Conviction of any of those offenses could result in a minimum sentence of 10 years to a maximum of life in prison.

At issue are not only the incompatibility of U.S. and Canadian drug laws, but the acquiescence of the RCMP (the Canadian national/federal police force) and the Canadian legal system in carrying out the arrest in coordination with the Drug Enforcement Administration and the U.S. legal system.

A statement released by drug enforcement administrator Karen Tandy following Emery's arrest said, "Emery and his organization had been designated as one of the Attorney General's most wanted international drug trafficking organizational targets -- one of only 46 in the world and the only one from Canada."

Emery wrote in his magazine that the Drug Enforcement Administration even has a subscription to Cannabis Culture magazine and that it was purchased with money orders on U.S. Department of Justice stationery.

At the time of his arrest, Canada's "Globe and Mail" newspaper reported that special agent Rodney Benson of the Drug Enforcement Administration claimed that Emery had distributed millions of cannabis seeds to U.S. customers over the years, earning as much as \$3 million annually.

Benson told a Seattle news conference at the time, "I am pleased to announce that he is out of business as of today. His overblown arrogance and abuse of the rule of law will no longer be on display. Like other drugs, marijuana harms the innocents."

U.S. officials praised Canadian law enforcement for its "outstanding cooperation" in the drug bust.

The only previous time Emery has spent time in jail for a marijuana-related charge was two months for passing a joint -- a marijuana cigarette -- at a Saskatchewan pro-legalization rally.

The Vancouver Canucks beat the Dallas Stars, 4-3, in that first game of the Stanley Cup playoffs. Things were looking up for Emery,

at least as a hockey fan.

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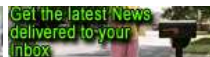
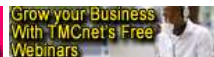
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