

Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform

committed to preventing tragedy that arises from illicit drug use

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NEWSLETTER

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NEXT Meeting

Thursday 28th July 2011

at 7.30pm

Catch up with Brian & Marion (they are fresh back from their sojourn in Vienna) about the latest developments in Europe where most of the action is.

Venue: St Ninian's Uniting Church, cnr Mouat and Brigalow Sts, Lyneham.

Refreshments will follow

IN THIS EDITION

Editorial – Drug Action Week 2012

Media release: Let's be smart and safe because being tough and dumb doesn't work

Ex AFP Commissioner, Mick Palmer, "After 33 years, I can no longer ignore the evidence on drugs"

Kenya leads us: drug use is declared a public health issue there

Some politicians willing to speak out: Move to refer Drug Policy to the Productivity Commission

Wikileaks reveals United States diplomacy
The Cattle dog keeping the mob in line drug action week 2012

DRUG ACTION WEEK 2012

Federal Launch or the minimisation of harm minimisation

The annual Drug Action Week for 2012 has just passed. I have not experienced one like it. The significance of the week in the ACT can be gauged by comparing the ACT Launch with that for the Commonwealth – one in the glamour of the Parliament House on the Hill and the other in the serviceable, pleasant but unglamorous ambience of the ACT Assembly's reception room. Gai Brodtman, the member for Canberra, did the honours in place of the Hon. Mark Butler, Minister for Mental Health and Ageing, Minister for Social Inclusion, Minister Assisting the Prime Minister on Mental Health Reform whose bundle of responsibilities includes drug policy. Gai Brodtman's speech on the year's theme of "Looking after *your* Mind!" was safe to the point of platitude. She referred to the Commonwealth Government's support for Drug Action week, raising awareness in the community of the danger that drugs can do to

young minds and a commitment to continue giving attention to this important issue. She made no reference to the fact that the stresses of the criminal justice processes cause and aggravate mental health problems.

ACT Launch: Prison NSP: a kick along by John Hargreaves

A replacement was also engaged for the ACT launch: John Hargreaves did the honours rather than the Chief Minister and Minister for Health, Katy Gallagher, who had been billed to do so. John Hargreaves' words were measured too but he did not hesitate to mention harm minimisation (or reduction) – terms that were entirely absent from the speech of his Commonwealth opposite number. Commonwealth caution vanished entirely at the end of John Hargreaves' speech when he gave a strongly worded plug for the introduction of the Needle/Syringe program into the ACT prison. In that he was echoing the strong public support by the ACT's Chief Minister herself, Katy Gallagher. That step which will make the ACT the only jurisdiction in Australia to do so.

Drug policy: a gift to political opportunism

Such advocacy exposes her Government to opportunistic attack, fear of which has scared so many politicians away from addressing the injustices, stupidities and counter productive side effects of existing drug policy. Paul Keating's, memorable turn of phrase which he used recently on a Four Corner's programme on Indigenous Land Rights is equally applicable to Drug Policy: "You only had to touch this issue and it went off on you all over the place. That's why no-one [has] ever done anything with it." That explains the super caution of his federal successors and stresses the political courage and open mindedness of ACT politicians in Government.

Lisa Prior: We should have nothing to hide or, the only thing to fear is fear itself

But back to Drug Action Week. Lisa Prior spoke next. She's an arts and law graduate, a mother and a journalist and columnist with the Sydney Morning Herald and recent author of, *A Small Book About Drugs*. Not content with Arts and Law she is now studying medicine - a vibrant high achiever and change agent if ever there was one. Her words liberated minds and, as the subsequent discussion revealed, tongues, after she revealed that she was an occasional party pill popper. Drug use may be

undesirable (though that flies in the face of the willingness of a high proportion of the population to at least try them) but whatever the case, law enforcement works to make them more accessible. Those who try them should not be made criminals.

She spoke of the incestuous relationship in Sydney between some police, politicians and sections of the media playing a tough on drugs card. She considered that the chances of change are greatest in the ACT that real life steps will be made towards the establishment of a sensible drugs policy . Listening to her was a liberating experience.

Even so, she did not call for an open slather. She acknowledged real dangers of many drugs but pleaded that we eliminate the harms caused by treating drug users as criminals. To my mind her open mindedness set the tone of Drug Action Week in the ACT at the three following events I attended.

Prof Ian Webster: harm minimisation marginalised

The first was an evening seminar on AOD at Canberra Grammar School for parents of students of regional secondary schools and involving discussion with a panel of leading experts and compared by the ABC's Genevieve Jacobs. Humane and wise, professor of public health Prof Ian Webster kicked off proceedings with a discussion of harm minimisation. Drug policy should embrace the principle of doctoring: that one should do no harm. Prof. Webster lamented that harm minimisation now seemed to be "marginalised" – to have been "put in a corner."

Criminalisation of drug use still deterring our kids from seeking help

Other speakers were Prof Robin Room, Matt Noffs who, among other things, has got the Street University going in Sydney and Marty Owen, the chief intensive care paramedic with the Ambulance Service. Marty Owen revealed that many kids who called the ambulance service for advice on helping their mates were reluctant to reveal their whereabouts when drugs are involved. This reluctance is very worrying and has led to deaths in the past. Clearly the message has not got out that police do not attend ambulance callouts. Perhaps it is difficult to believe this message while the law continues to designate drug users as criminals.

Prof. Robin Room: Sweden: Not a drug free Nirvana

Prof. Room, who has worked for several years in Sweden, spoke of that country's drug free drug policy which is advocated for Australia by those opposed to any relaxation of drug policy. He acknowledged that there was less drug use there but observed that the level of problematic drug use

was similar to that in other European countries. He added that for all its drug free objectives, Sweden was introducing elements of harm minimisation that Australia had pioneered. Finally, he noted that welfare state Sweden supported drug treatment services to a level that he doubted Australia would ever be prepared to do.

I think it is fair to say that the audience of parents was overwhelmingly concerned to see that their children would be kept safe even when they indulged in unwise behaviour.

Drug Action Week Conference: Where the ACT has come from

The fifth ACT Alcohol, Tobacco and Other Drugs Sector Conference at which three of us carried the flag for Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform developed a free ranging conversation about drugs and drug policy within the Conference theme of "Integration and implementation: ATOD research, policy and practice." I found of particular value presentations by Dr Phyll Dance, Dr Michael Tedeschi and Prof. Lynne Magor-Blatch. In a session on "Where have we come from? Reflections over 20 years". Dr Tedeschi proposed a teasing mind exercise. We did things then that we would never think of doing now. What things are we doing now that we will be regarding as unthinkable when we looking back in 20 years time? For me by far and away the most moving presentation of the whole conference was that of Jude Byrne of AIVL when describing the stigma and discrimination that her children suffered in school and elsewhere just because their mother was a drug consumer. This country does not merit the description "civilised" while that continues. The Alcohol Tobacco & Other Drug Association of the ACT (ATODA) deserves the highest praise for organising the conference as well as the earlier launch.

FFDLR Drug Action Week forum 2012

Families and Friend's own contribution to Drug Action Week occurred at lunchtime on Thursday 21st when Professor Nicholas Cowdery, AM QC, recently retired NSW Director of Public Prosecutions spoke. The subject he chose was "Living with drugs: fostering a safe, open and rational society." His views on the ineffectiveness, waste and general harmfulness of drug policy are well known. He developed his careful arguments with daunting clarity to an audience of about 50 – many of them newcomers to the drug debate. We could not have had a more articulate teacher. Professor Cowdery has been one of those rare creatures in this country who spoke his view while in office, a view formed, as he said, from decades of experience as one of Australia's most senior criminal lawyers who has defended as well as successfully prosecuted many drug dealers.

Families and Friends issued a media release on the eve of the forum, a copy of which is attached. The audio of Prof' Cowdery's address and a transcript will be available shortly on our website.

Prof. Cowdery on the political dividends of the War on Drugs.

Prof. Cowdery, a participant in the January Australia21 Roundtable, put in an eloquent plea in support of the core recommendation of that report for an open discussion on better options to deal with the drug problem. Indeed the free ranging discussion of much of this year's Drug Action Week reflected that sentiment. Even so, it is clear that such open mindedness does not reach the political level here which is disappointing in the light of the willingness of the ACT Government to go out on a limb in support of cutting edge measures such as the introduction of a needle-syringe program into the prison and providing naloxone on prescription to potential opioid overdose victims and to boost drug rehabilitation for the indigenous community.

The act's political boldness is all the more to be commended in the light of the lamentable opportunism of the ACT Opposition. Their action, which is out of step with Liberal principles and policy in the past, brings to mind Prof Cowdery's description of President Nixon's decision in 1971 to declare a war on drugs:

"But in 1971 President Richard Nixon in the United States of America was facing re-election and he had some political issues that he was not dealing with terribly satisfactorily and in a completely cynical political gesture declared the war on drugs on the 17th June 1971."

Here the Opposition has sought to take cheap advantage in allying itself with the corrections officers: exactly the sort of explosion of tough on drugs and crime rhetoric that has deterred most Australian politicians in this country from even discussing the possibility of reform.

In an analysis of Realpolitik, Prof. Cowdery, identified three political dividends that tempt unscrupulous politicians into playing the tough on drugs card

- "The first is that it grabs people's attention and directs their attention against a particular problem. So it's a very good PR step for a politician to take.
- "Secondly, it enables resources, money, to be redirected from other programs that might be quite beneficial to the community into this war. Because we're at war and we

need all the resources that we can get. And thank you very much taxpayer. We'll have as much of your money as we can allocate to that cause. So it is a justification for moving money from other programs into that program.

- "Thirdly, it is a justification for bending the rules and for creating new rules about the way in which we will proceed; a justification for introducing extraordinary measures of surveillance, of apprehension, interrogation, investigation, trampling on people's human rights in ways that would not be acceptable if we were not 'at war'"

Prof Cowdery observed that there is thus a very real political purpose behind approaching drug policy in this way and we shouldn't be snowed by the expression that we are "at war".

Prof. Nicholas Cowdery: Make No mistake, we're waging war against drugs in Australia

Prof. Cowdery put paid to the arguments of proponents of present failed system that Australia has never waged war against drug. He pointed out that purer, more potent drugs continue to be readily available at cheap prices in spite of billions of dollars that Australia spends annually on supply reduction:

"We have been waging war. We are waging war. We are doing our best with the resources that are available to try and stop illicit drug involvement. The problem to my mind is having given this problem to the criminal justice system in the first place."

Prof. Nicholas Cowdery: The War on Drugs has failed!

"Surveys show that drugs have become easier to obtain in the face of all of this law enforcement and there have been increases in the incidence of death, disease, crime, corruption, increases in the number of prisoners in prison because of some drug associated criminal offending and huge increases in public expenditure to try and stop all of this. That doesn't seem to me like a very good success rate for the war against drugs."

FFDLR Booklet: "Breaking the taboo"

We also prepared a booklet entitled "Breaking the taboo: let's start a conversation on drug policy." This sought to identify a sample of social problems falling within most portfolios of ministers which were either caused or compounded by existing drug policy. These ranged from blood borne diseases, care and protection, homelessness and

“complex student management” in schools. It also sketched how drug policy impacted negatively on the core wellbeing of the most disadvantaged in the community whose interests ACTCOSS was mandated to promote. Finally, it highlighted the interests of the local Chamber of Commerce in the scope for reduction in drug related crime that bears particularly heavily on small business.

The booklet was composed as a reflection of our deep disappointment at the peremptory dismissal of the request in the petition signed by over 400 Canberrans submitted to the Assembly by Families and Friends. The ACT Attorney General at a meeting in May made it clear that the Government was not prepared to move or otherwise promote a debate on drug policy.

The booklet took up themes broached in the report issued in June last year of the Global Commission on Drugs, a rallying call of which was: “Break the taboo on debate and reform. The time for action is now”. The need for a discussion was reiterated in the Australian context in the Australia21 report issued earlier this year. The booklet title also borrowed from ATODA’s media release advertising the launch of Drug Action Week: “Join the conversation about drugs.”

Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform issued the following Media Release on 20 June 2012

Drugs:

Let’s be smart and safe because being tough and dumb doesn’t work

Those who reckon we haven’t genuinely had a war on drugs are deluded, declares Prof Nicholas Cowdery AM QC, recently retired NSW Director of Public Prosecutions and former NSW acting judge. Prof. Cowdery is speaking at lunchtime (12:30pm) on Thursday 21st at a Drug Action Week Forum organised by Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform in the Legislative Assembly building.

“Those who reckon that we’ve never really had a war on drugs in this country don’t know what they’re talking about. In my time,” said the former DPP, “I’ve sent scores of drug dealers to prison but it has made no difference. There are always replacements for those eliminated – their removal creates business opportunities for others. Nothing I did made a dent in the supply of drugs available on the streets or in prisons.”

“We cannot keep drugs out of maximum security prisons anywhere. How can you realistically hope to keep drugs out of society generally?”

The first drug control convention was drawn up in 1912. I ask those who call for more of the same to produce the evidence that a second century of it

will produce the drug free world that the past century has so obviously failed to do.

There has always been and always will be, a demand for drugs - some people will always want to alter their moods, for a multitude of reasons and in many different circumstances.

Prof Cowdery explained that drugs legal and illegal are commodities in a market (or series of markets). “When there is a demand for something, there will always be suppliers - prepared, if necessary, to break the law to supply the commodity in a black market. Compensation for the risk thereby taken is in the form of inflated profit - high premium charges for the commodity. A kg of heroin increases in price 300 times between Bangkok and Canberra.” Prof Cowdery added that the higher price doesn’t dampen demand because the commodities are addictive and eagerly sought. The way to break the black market is to remove the profit.

Prof Cowdery pointed out that it has been known for years that prohibition of drugs and the creation of a black market creates harm, on top of the harm caused by the drugs themselves. “Because the quality and quantity of drug being supplied is not regulated, there is the risk of death through overdose or poisoning (400 users die in Australia each year). Because the drugs (especially injecting drugs) are consumed in secret, furtive, unhygienic circumstances, there is the risk of disease from shared unsanitary equipment.”

Because the price is high, regular users without a high wage must take other peoples’ assets to fund their use and secondary crime occurs. Because the profits of the larger traffickers are so high, they can afford to corrupt law enforcement (some of which officials are susceptible) to ensure smooth passage.

Prof. Cowdery said it is time to face up to it that the prohibition model has failed and that we must deal with drugs differently “The issue for the community”, he said, “is now what form that should take, without creating more harm than presently occurs?”

He suggested that we could start by again medically prescribing heroin for both the relief of intractable pain and the treatment (and recovery) of those addicted - as we did before 1953. We could medically prescribe cannabis, as occurs in 16 States of the USA, Canada, the Netherlands, Israel and in five other European countries. In Australia at present, more than twice as much money is spent on cannabis as on table wine.

We must protect public health by introducing needle and syringe exchange programs in prisons and expanding them elsewhere.

Prof. Cowdery will also launch a booklet: “*Breaking the Taboo*”.

**Ex AFP Police Commission, Mick Palmer AO
APM**

After 33 years, I can no longer ignore

the evidence on drugs

June 7, 2012

The reality ... drug law enforcement has had little impact on the Australian drug market.

As a 33-year police practitioner who was commissioner of the Australian Federal Police during the "tough on drugs" period, I fully understand the concerns of those who argue there is no reason to reconsider drug policy and I shared many of them until recent years. My police experience, in both the state/territory and federal jurisdictions, together with some 15 months practising at the private bar as a defence barrister and several years experience in the drug and alcohol fields, has convinced me that I was wrong.

The reality is that, contrary to frequent assertions, drug law enforcement has had little impact on the Australian drug market. This is true in most countries in the world.

In Australia the police are better resourced than ever, better trained than ever, more effective than ever and yet their impact on the drug trade, on any objective assessment, has been minimal.

In the Herald last week, the opposition health spokesman, Peter Dutton, asserted that "law enforcement does achieve significant results and is not yet at its peak of effectiveness". I feel compelled to respond, because frankly the evidence does not stack up. In Australia last year, 86 per cent of drug users said that obtaining heroin was "easy" or "very easy", while 93 per cent reported that obtaining hydroponic cannabis was "easy" or "very easy".

The price of street heroin and cocaine decreased by more than 80 per cent in the US and Europe in the past 20 years. Despite a huge investment by the US in drug law enforcement, northern Mexico has descended into a drug cartel battlefield, driven by the demand for illicit drugs within the US. At the local level, our young people can and do purchase illicit drugs with ease and generally with impunity. If this is an effective policy at work, I am not sure what failure would look like.

In any conversation, however, it will be important to acknowledge that there are no good guys or bad guys in the debate, only concerned guys. Too often emotion tends to drive public commentary, with proponents of either side branding their opponents as either "soft on drugs loopies" or "the prohibitionist Gestapo". Neither label is correct or adds value to the debate.

Mr Dutton argues that supporters of the present policy are just as well informed on the subject as those arguing for consideration of change. The truth is I have found it difficult to find informed commentators willing to support the present drug

policy. The Australia 21 report was largely based on a roundtable discussion which included two former senior law enforcement officials, two former Commonwealth ministers for health, a former ACT chief minister, two former state Labor premiers, many of Australia's leading drugs researchers and clinicians, parents who had lost children to drugs and two very impressive young people.

The report came to the same general conclusion as the 2011 report of the Global Commission on Drug Policy, which included former presidents of four countries, a former UN secretary-general, a former chairman of the US Federal Reserve and a former US secretary of state.

One of the advocates for drug law reform in South America is Otto Perez Molina, the President of Guatemala, who used to be in charge of drug law enforcement in his country.

We owe it to future generations to be realistic; to be prepared to listen and consider these commentaries and to examine the facts and the options.

Mr Dutton also cautions against the use of experience of other countries that have benefited from liberalising drug policy.

I ask a counter question: why, in the face of a poorly-performing policy, should Australia not attempt to benefit from the international drug policy experience, when we try to learn from international policy advances and errors in every other area?

The more liberal approach to drug policy in Switzerland and Portugal in the past 20 years appears to have achieved many benefits with no serious adverse effects.

In contrast, drug overdose deaths are high and rising in Sweden, one of the last developed countries that champions a punitive drug policy.

In recent decades, Australian governments have relied heavily on drug law enforcement (while providing more limited funding for health and social responses), yet the drug market has continued to expand. Around the world, drug production has increased, drug consumption has increased, the number of new kinds of drugs has increased, drugs are readily available, drug prices have decreased and the purity of street drugs has increased.

It's time the community and its leaders had the courage to look at this issue with fresh eyes.

(From: <http://www.smh.com.au/opinion/politics/after-33-years-i-can-no-longer-ignore-the-evidence-on-drugs-20120606-1zwpr.html>).

KENYA LEADS US DRUG USE IS DECLARED A PUBLIC HEALTH ISSUE THERE:

The Kenyan Government recently announced that it is distributing free syringes and needles to more than 50,000 injecting drug users (IDUs) across the country. It was prompted by the high percentage of injecting drug users in Kenya who are HIV positive and follows "a decision by the government in 2010 to address injection drug use as a public health issue rather than a criminal matter".

Full story at:

http://www.plusnews.org/Report/95601/KENYA-Needles-to-be-distributed-to-injecting-drug-users?goback=.gde_4146546_member_122619010

In Australia, Hepatitis C is the blood borne disease of principal concern. Of course, Australia funds the provision of sterile syringes in the community but there remains political opposition to addressing injecting drug use as a public health issue rather than a criminal matter. Indeed one hears it said from some politicians that there is no point in providing for sterile drug use in prisons because prisoners will become infected anyway. So we wait for Hepatitis C infection rates to get even worse and even for an HIV epidemic to crank up before we think of acting.

IT'S HIGH TIME FOR LEADERSHIP AT FRONTLINE IN WAR ON DRUGS Greens Senator Dr Richard Di Natale

Sydney Morning Herald, 30 May 2012

The arguments for changing our approach to illicit drugs are well worn. Over successive decades, drug production and consumption have soared and drugs are now purer and cheaper than ever before. Deaths, diseases, crime and corruption are endemic despite massive resources aimed at stamping out the drug trade. Put simply, our response to illicit drugs is a public policy disaster. How did we get here?

The arguments for changing our approach to illicit drugs are well worn. Over successive decades, drug production and consumption have soared and drugs are now purer and cheaper than ever before. Deaths, diseases, crime and corruption are endemic despite massive resources aimed at stamping out the drug trade. Put simply, our response to illicit drugs is a public policy disaster. How did we get here?

Australia was once a world leader in illicit drugs policy. We were one of the first nations to introduce needle and syringe programs to reduce the spread of blood-borne viruses among injecting drug users. An independent report commissioned by the Australian government found that between 2000 and 2009, this policy averted 32,050 cases of HIV, 96,667 cases of hepatitis C and generated long-term cost savings of \$1.28 billion.

Sadly, the bipartisan consensus on drugs policy was abandoned in 1997 when shortly after taking power John Howard scuppered a proposed scientific trial to evaluate the effectiveness of prescription heroin for heroin dependence. In Victoria, a policy to establish a multi-suburb supervised injecting room trial stalled after it was rejected by the Coalition-controlled Legislative Council. It is now de rigueur to treat drug law reform as a political minefield.

There is certainly no shortage of former politicians who are willing to tackle the issue. In a report published last year, the Global Commission on Drug Policy, which included former UN secretary-general Kofi Annan and former presidents of Mexico, Colombia, Greece and Brazil, delivered a scathing assessment of the status quo and called for the legalisation of some drugs and decriminalisation of personal drug use.

The authors of an Australia21 report critical of the policy of prohibition and criminal sanctions for drug users included a former premier, former chief minister, former federal health minister and former Australian Federal Police commissioner. It called for a reopening of the national debate on the regulation and control of illicit drugs.

Despite the overwhelming evidence and momentum for reform, the ink was barely dry before political leaders started distancing themselves from that report. There are several reasons why politicians refuse to engage in this debate.

The first is the media. When this complex issue is relentlessly dumbed down to a "soft on crime" message in newspaper headlines, politicians are reluctant to speak up. In the lead-up to the 2004 election the Greens opened up the drugs debate but were pilloried by the tabloid press. It's hard to sustain support when people read that you want to sell heroin on street corners.

The second reason is politicians themselves. The professionalisation of the political class means conviction politicians are now rare in the halls of power. A technocratic career MP has little incentive to tackle a risky and complex issue like drug reform. Although in private they might harbour doubts about the war on drugs, spending political capital to pursue a difficult reform rarely makes the to-do list.

The third reason is that while there are groups with an interest in the status quo, the electoral dividends of championing reform are not obvious. Lives are at stake in this debate, but there is no demographic, swinging voter or marginal seat that will instantly reward a brave politician. Perhaps if public health advocates had pockets as deep as mining executives things might be different.

There are signs, however, that things may be changing. Papers such as this one openly debating the war on drugs is a good start. And when Alan Jones admits the current approach needs a rethink

there's cause for hope. The time is ripe for leadership.

It is a mistake to underestimate the public. The vast majority of people have either used drugs or know people who have. Almost everyone agrees we have a problem but there is no consensus on how to respond. The community knows existing drug laws are ineffective. They see criminal penalties for individual users make criminals of ordinary people and make a potentially harmful product far more dangerous. But they also worry any policy change could lead to greater harm.

The good news is where criminal penalties for individuals who use drugs have been abolished, consumption has not risen. Portugal, for example, abolished criminal penalties for individual drug use in 2001 and the consumption of drugs like heroin decreased. The change resulted in more people referred for treatment and a decrease in HIV cases and overdose deaths.

That's why the Greens will continue to argue resources must be directed at harm reduction and treatment rather than criminalising individual users. Changes in drugs policy must be based on the best available evidence rather than politics or ideology. They should be gradual and incremental.

Before entering Parliament, I saw first hand the difference that drugs policy can make in people's lives. From prescribing methadone in Victoria to setting up treatment programs in India, it became clear to me that locking users up only compounds the harms that drugs can cause. It's time to treat this as a health issue rather than a criminal one.

Senator Richard Di Natale is the Greens spokesman for health and a former GP and public health specialist who has worked in the drug and alcohol field.

SOURCE:

http://newsstore.smh.com.au/apps/viewDocument.ac?page=1&sy=smh&kw=%22Richard+Di+Natale%22&pb=all_ffx&dt=selectRange&dr=3months&so=relevance&sf=text&sf=headline&rc=10&rm=200&sp=nrm&clsPage=1&docID=SMH120530SN7016D0L5U visited 24/06/2012.

SOME POLITICIANS WILLING TO SPEAK OUT

Move to refer Drug Policy to the Productivity Commission

Back at the beginning of 2007 Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform started urging for drug policy to be referred to the Productivity Commission. Dr Mal Washer (Liberal Member for Moore in Western Australia) and Julia Irwin (former ALP member for Fowler in NSW) inscribed a motion on the Votes & Proceedings of the House of Representatives.

Now Dr Washer, convenor of the Parliamentary Group for Drug Law Reform, is speaking out. He believes that the focus needs to be on social and health programs, not criminal charges for users ... Liberal MP Mal Washer.

With the support of others he is having another go at getting up a Productivity Inquiry

Sydney Morning Herald, 27 June 2012

MPs move to step aside from politics in drugs debate

By Richard Willingham

DECRIMINALISING illegal drugs will be investigated by the peak independent policy adviser under a plan championed by a trio of federal MPs from different sides of Parliament, with the aim of taking politics out of the debate.

In April, a report from the Australia21 think tank argued the "war on drugs" and tough stance on illegal substances had failed, sparking debate and increasing support for decriminalising personal use from a swathe of eminent figures, including former police commissioners, state premiers and health ministers.

The Liberal MP Mal Washer, the Greens senator Richard Di Natale, both doctors, and the independent MP Rob Oakeshott will this morning call on the government to ask the Productivity Commission to investigate the adequacy of illegal drug laws.

Advertisement: Story continues below

"The reason for the Productivity Commission is to take the politics out of it and base it on evidence - which is dispassionate and hard-nosed. I've lost count of how many MPs have told me privately we have to change the approach to drugs, but won't speak out," Senator Di Natale told the Herald.

It was unclear which MP would move a motion but Dr Washer said he would ideally like a government MP to do so to ensure the best chance of success.

Dr Washer said the focus needed to be on social and health programs, not criminal charges for users.

"Most of the doctors I know say that the evidence is there across the world for the change. We just need to get governments to have their own commissions to say that is right."

The Labor MP Andrew Leigh has previously said that in relation to drugs "facts and evidence - not ideology and dogma - are the Australian way" and is understood to have spoken to the group in the past about a Productivity Commission push. However, he does not have the backing of the caucus.

From: <http://www.smh.com.au/national/mps-move-to-step-aside-from-politics-in-drugs-debate-20120626-210k7.html#ixzz1zQkHQbUc>

UNITED STATES DIPLOMACY

The Sheep dog keeping the mob in line

The United States was the main inspiration behind the development of the international drugs regime, its chief evangelizer. While it has never been reluctant to send in its diplomatic bovver boys when it has perceived countries to be wavering, it has been shown, as in the Iran-Contra Scandal, to turn a blind eye and even support the drug trade in the interests of broader American security interests. (This complicity is meticulously documented in Alfred W. McCoy's, *The politics of heroin: CIA Complicity in The Global Drug Trade*). The United States is credited with leaning on the Howard Government to reverse its decision and that of the States and Territories to support a trial of heroin prescription.

Professor Margaret Hamilton has recorded how earlier she and Professor Penington in 1996, while they were conducting an inquiry for the Victorian Premier's Drug Advisory Council, were summoned to Hobart to meet Mr Bob Gelbard, President Clinton's assistant secretary of State for Narcotics and Law Enforcement. Professor Hamilton has written of this:

"It was clear that Gelbard was interested in and concerned about any recommendations we might make that could be seen to be "going soft on drugs," including changes in the legal status of cannabis and support for a trail of heroin as a treatment option for heroin dependent people. It was an interesting meeting that the worldly experienced Penington found "quite amazing." The reporters of this meeting concluded that 'Australia cannot now make any radical break with the past or with our allies. These treaties are the work of the United Nations-and, before that, the League of Nations-but the passion and policing are mainly American'".

Even so, Australia21 has drawn heart from a string of referendums in the United States in favour of medical marijuana and even of decriminalization. It noted optimistically that: "Evidence from the United States suggests that, at least with respect to cannabis, some reconsideration is occurring in that country." However, it is questionable whether optimism is justified in the light of the successful opposition of the United States to the inclusion of the term "Harm Reduction in the Action Plan and declaration of the Special Sessions on Drugs of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGASS). Among the cables made public by Wikileaks is one sent in January 2009 from the U.S mission in Vienna which shows the depth of the U.S. concern, its questionable bed-fellows and the lengths it is prepared to go to expunge the phrase being championed by the European Union.

The following are extracts:

SUBJECT: **Breaking the UNGASS Impasse on "Harm Reduction"**

Summary

¶2. Negotiations for the UNGA special session have hit an impasse, created by EU insistence on adding the controversial term "harm reduction" to various parts of the draft UNGASS action plan and political declaration. While Canada, an opponent of the term's inclusion, is considering conceding to EU demands, other opponents are standing firm with the U.S. in preventing such a problematic element's inclusion. Mission has engaged counterparts at every level, from experts to ambassadors in an attempt to break the impasse and find compromise language. Mission believes there is increasing pressure within the EU to resolve this gridlock and avoid an embarrassing showdown at the March Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND) but some delegations will be inclined to hold this issue hostage up until the opening of the CND, in hopes the US will relent. To facilitate EU compromise, Mission recommends that the Department reach out to various capitals and the European Commission to help underscore the firmness of U.S. resolve-both to our allies and to the EU, before the EU horizontal group meeting in Brussels on February 4. Mission has urged like-minded countries here (Japan, Russia, Colombia) to take similar actions. End Summary.

EU Crusade on "Harm Reduction"

¶3. There have been difficult negotiations in Vienna on the "harm reduction" issue in the demand reduction chapter of the draft UNGASS action plan (Ref A) and political declaration. The Czech Republic reiterated this demand on January 26 on behalf of the presidency. The plan will be annexed to the political declaration expected to be issued by ministers attending the high-level segment of the UNGASS review meeting in Vienna March 10-12, 2009. The main divide is between EU advocates for including "harm reduction" in the plan, and those who oppose such inclusion, namely U.S., Russia, Japan, Colombia and possibly Canada. Although opposed to harm reduction, Canada's experts in Ottawa are receptive of a recent compromise (including the term in a footnote rather than in the text), and we understand that Ottawa will have a discussion on the political level to decide how to handle this issue.

Next Steps for Mission

¶5. Mission continues to engage with both skeptics and proponents of "harm reduction." . . . Mission will propose inserting "care" into the language as a way to address EU concerns.

¶7. Mission has suggested like-minded countries (Russia, Japan, Colombia) to intervene at the ambassadorial level in Vienna. . . . By engaging EU member states in a different context, it may help them to reevaluate their dogmatic and unproductive approach.

Source: <http://neurobonkers.com/2011/05/03/breaking-us-crusade-on-harm-reduction-crusadegate/> visited 17/06/2012).