

NEWSLETTER

September, 2012

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Join us.

NEXT MEETING

Thursday 27 September, 7.30pm
St Ninian's Uniting Church hall,
cnr Mouat and Brigalow Sts, LYNEHAM
Meetings are followed by refreshments and time for
a chat.

Remembrance Ceremonies

The Canberra Ceremony will take place on Monday 8th October at 12.30 pm at the Memorial Site, Weston Park, Yarralumla.

Speakers will be:

- Mal Washer (MP) - Liberal Member for Moore, WA
- Rev Ivan Roberts, Uniting Church Minister at City Church
- Elaine Bridge, Parent

If you have someone you would like remembered at the ceremony please contact Marion on 62542961 or email mcconnell@ffdlr.org.au.

A flier with details is enclosed in the mail-out for ACT residents. Please pin it on a notice board so that others not on this mailing list will know of the event.

Two Sydney events will be held on Saturday 20th October, 6pm at Ashfield Uniting Church and Monday 22nd October, 1pm at the Wayside Chapel in Kings Cross.

Editorial

ACT election report card and 2nd Australia21 report

The second Australia21 report, "Alternatives to prohibition - Illicit drugs: How we can stop killing and criminalising young Australians" was launched on 9 September. It reiterated that attempts to control drug use through the criminal justice system have clearly failed. It called for a National Summit in 2013, to examine specific proposals for reform (including the regulation of cannabis and ecstasy). Importantly the report also recommends that a reference be put to the Productivity Commission to examine the cost-effectiveness of the current allocation of resources relevant to illicit drugs.

Many will know that there are elections coming up in the ACT. The various parties are competing for attention of voters and for their votes when voting day comes around. In addition to the Labor party, the Liberal party and the Greens, there is a Pirates party, a Motorists party, a Very Fast Train party and so on.

Naturally the three currently elected parties stand the best chances in the election.

In the matter of drug law reform the Greens and Labor parties have performed better than the Liberals. The Labor party's leader and Chief Minister has stood up for her principles. She has consistently said that she supports the provision of health services in the new ACT prison to the same extent as is provided to the general community. This includes the provision of a syringe exchange program and she has made an election pledge to introduce such a scheme if re-elected. The Greens have also consistently supported a syringe exchange program in the AMC.

The prison officers and their union, the CPSU, have opposed such a move and in this respect they have the full support of the Liberal party. The Motorists party is calling for more draconian penalties for drug users and others who infringe the law.

There are many election forums whereby candidates front up to community organisations, put their policies, and respond to questions from community members. The ACT's Alcohol, Tobacco and Other Drugs Association conducted such a forum recently. The format was a brief presentation of evidence relating to Alcohol and other drugs by three experts; Associate Professor Richard Midford, from the Centre for Indigenous Australian Education and Research at Edith Cowan University; Mr Tony Brown, a NSW Community Campaigner for the reduction of alcohol related violence; and Mr Ray Lovett, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies & National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health, Australian National University. Following those speakers Katy Gallagher, ACT Chief Minister and Health Minister, Jeremy Hanson, ACT Shadow Minister for Health and Amanda Bresnan, ACT Greens Health Spokesperson were given an opportunity to promote their alcohol and other drugs policy platform, respond to the expert presentations and then respond to questions from the audience. Justice Richard Refshauge chaired the forum.

Before the questions from the audience there seemed to be little between the three candidates.

However the responses to questions identified differences in the policies of each party. A question about roadside drug testing was put, stating that there is very little evidence to say that roadside drug testing is effective as a measure to improve road safety and asking if the candidate would undertake an evidence based marketing campaign on drug driving and would he/she support an evaluation of roadside drug testing in terms of its impact on road crashes injuries and deaths.

Amanda Bresnan was fully supportive of the questioner's propositions. Katy Gallagher outlined some action already underway in respect of the proposals and gave full support to them. Jeremy Hanson stated that he rejected the premise to the question and stated also that drug driving testing has been

“proven” to be effective in every other jurisdiction in Australia and proceeded to identify the detection rate of drivers who had been using drugs. He did not seem to realise the detection rate of drivers using drugs is somewhat different to effectiveness as a road safety issue.

I had a chance to ask the following question of the candidates: “There has been significant discussion in the ACT and across Australia following the release of the two Australia21 reports on the need for reform of illicit drug policies. The three pillars of supply, demand and harm reduction lie at the core of both the ACT and national drug strategies. It is argued, however, that the relative investment between these pillars is imbalanced, with around 75% allocated to law enforcement and far too little to prevention and treatment. Will you support, and advocate for, the proposal of Families & Friends for Drug Law Reform, and Australia21, that the Productivity Commission conduct an investigation into the relative cost-effectiveness of supply reduction, demand reduction and harm reduction to ensure that the nation, and the ACT, gets the right balance of investment? And will you or your party participate in mature discussions about alternatives to our current prohibition policies?”

In response Katy Gallagher and Amanda Bresnan agreed that they would support and advocate for a reference to the Productivity Commission. In respect to the second part of the question neither dismissed the idea of a mature discussion on drug policies but both pointed out the practical difficulties of making progress on the matter. Jeremy Hanson declared an outright **no** to both questions stating that he strongly believed the balance was right.

It is difficult to support a party that is unwilling to seek objective and independent advice and evidence, and is unwilling to entertain the idea of a mature discussion of the issue.

Details of the the Australia21 report, its launch and FFDLR’s media release can be found on our website ffdlr.org.au.

Vale Peter Watney

Born 3 May 1922, passed away 20 August 2012, aged 90 years

Peter Watney was a founding member of Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform since its inception in 1995. He had contributed significantly to the group. In the early days, when developing a new organisation was rather daunting for most of us, Peter was unconcerned and readily agreed to develop the constitution.

He was a very competent treasurer for FFDLR for many years until he decided it needed a younger person. Not that we thought so but this was his wish. He had also been treasurer and a member of the Australian Drug Law Reform Foundation. Long term members of that organisation Dr Alex Wodak, former member of NSW upper house Ann Symonds and former independent member of the Legislative Assembly Michael Moore recognise the extent of Peter’s contribution to drug law reform regret his loss.

Peter came to the realisation that the prohibition drug laws were wrong, that they were illogical and inconsistent when he was working with Jobless Action many years prior to his membership of FFDLR, when a young couple introduced him to the realities of the drug laws which affected their employment prospects.

He came to almost every meeting of FFDLR and every activity

we undertook and was always a strong contributor. He had never missed an Annual Remembrance Ceremony. He was very active on the internet, always ready to put his point of view in a rational and objective manner on the many discussion forums on illegal drugs policies. He always argued on issues, not on the personalities. I am sure that Peter would have had a smile if he knew that one of his staunchest opponents on one of those forums said: “the world is worse off for the passing of men like Peter”. This shows the respect in which Peter was held even amongst his opponents.

Peter’s many letters to the editor raising awareness on the need for better drug policies will be missed. Missed also will be how he always brought us back to first principles. At many of our meetings he would ask “what are the principles that were used to decide prohibition of certain drugs?” The question of course was rhetorical because he knew there were no principles underlying the prohibition of drugs.

In support of his stand against prohibition he often told of how one of his ancestors who was in the whisky business in Canada made his fortune during alcohol prohibition by smuggling his product across the Hudson river into the US.

Through his service with the British army he also had first hand knowledge of Afghanistan, a place from where the majority of the world’s street heroin comes. He thus realised the futility of attempts to eradicate the opium poppy crop in such a rugged terrain and such an impoverished country.

On our last visit to Peter in hospital when we delivered the August Newsletter to him and told him of Katy Gallagher’s announcement about the needle and syringe program in the ACT Prison he asked: “How hopeful are you?” I hope our answer gave Peter some reassurance of some progress on the issue for which he had been advocating for such a long time.

It was only before the recent July meeting that he put in an apology. He said that he thought old age was catching up with him.

All the members of FFDLR extend their sincere sympathy to Rosemary, Tessa, Jeremy, Simon and their partners and to Peter’s grandchildren of whom we know he was very proud.

Drug use is an issue for society, not the criminal justice system

Richard Horton, Sydney Morning Herald, September 10, 2012

Last week, my 11-year-old daughter started senior school in London. In some ways, it was her initiation into the foothills of adolescence. She is a smart and sensible girl. But I know there are illicit drugs used at her school.

I also have to recognise some troubling truths. I know that when the best scientific evidence in the world is brought together, as was done earlier this year by researchers Louisa Degenhardt and Wayne Hall, it shows about one in 20 people aged 15 to 64 have used an illicit drug in the past year.

So what do I hope for my daughter? I hope she won’t get drawn into drug use, of course. I hope she won’t be that one out of 20. But hope isn’t good enough.

When it comes to illicit drugs, we need intelligent policies. Intelligent policies need good data and reliable evidence drawn from carefully conducted research studies. We would never

knowingly allow a medicine to be prescribed without good evidence about its safety and effectiveness. Yet we seem to be happy to let our policies around drugs be shaped by ignorance and prejudice.

A report launched in Adelaide yesterday by Australia21, Alternatives to Prohibition, is subtitled Illicit drugs: how we can stop killing and criminalising young Australians. It sets out the lessons learnt about the failed war on drugs from other countries, especially Sweden, Switzerland, the Netherlands and Portugal. Those lessons should send an electric shock to wake Australian politicians from their comatose response to one of the most important social emergencies facing this country.

Drug use is often linked with poor school performance, early school leaving, behavioural disorders, social and family disadvantage, parental substance use and mental ill-health. And yet Australia sees drug use, as does much of the rest of the world, led by the US, as an issue for law enforcement agencies.

But the evidence tells us that until we see drug use as an issue for society, and not one for our criminal justice system, we will be condemned to worsening, not improving, the lives of those who come into contact with drugs.

Why is criminalisation not the answer? There is just no reliable evidence that tougher criminal sanctions deter drug use or offending. On the contrary, criminalisation worsens the health and wellbeing of drug users, increases risk behaviours, drives the spread of HIV, encourages other crime and discourages people who use drugs from seeking treatment. There is good evidence that the use of illicit drugs is increasing. Is harsher and more intensive criminalisation - arresting young people, locking them up, in some countries even executing them - the answer? No. So far, politicians and policymakers have tended to resist changes to drug policies. They believe the public would never accept it. I don't accept that cynical view. I believe the public would begin to shift its opinion if people knew the full facts.

Prohibition is not the only means available to us. There is a wealth of evidence to suggest alternative strategies that will have a much greater dividend for those who take drugs, as well as for the society we share. The sad fact is that in the world of policy making around drug use, evidence hasn't counted for much.

So let me return to my daughter. The wrong approach would be to threaten her with criminal prosecution. The right approach is to ensure that all the conditions that might lead her towards drugs - what her parents do, the stability of her family life, her school, her friends, and her general health - are such that she will not be tempted into a destructive addiction.

But if the worst happened, if she did one day use drugs, I'd want to protect her from harm, not see her branded a criminal. This principle, harm reduction, is one of the most important ideas in public health. It underpins everything we do.

Coming from Britain, which has repeatedly failed to address drug use rationally and with compassion, I welcome Australia21's efforts. The report recommends a national drug summit next year. Even more importantly, it recommends young people be included in the debate about drug policy.

This enlightened and evidence-driven report deserves not only our unreserved admiration, but also our urgent attention.

Dr Richard Horton is editor-in-chief of The Lancet. This is an edited version of a speech he gave in Adelaide to launch the Australia21 report on 9 September.

Leaders know they have stupid drug policies, but don't have the guts to change them

The Australia 21 report, from a group of experts and young people, calls on governments to take cannabis out of the hands of criminals and regulate it themselves.

OUR 'hardline' politicians need to be forced to take their heads out of the sand on drugs, says Tory Shepherd, Adelaidenow, September 10, 2012

CANNABIS, dope, ganja, weed - it is Australia's most commonly used illicit drug.

Some people have a bad reaction to being stoned - it can make them lethargic, confused. They may be prone to doing nothing when they should be doing something. They can get paranoid, distanced from reality, or lack motivation.

When it comes to drugs policy, the Government is acting as though it is stoned. It finds it easier to sit on the couch with the TV tuned to the same old station than it would be to take a breath of fresh air and face the real world. The world where their drugs policy is failing; has failed.

They have some reason to be paranoid - the fear-mongers are out in force when it comes to drugs. They paint any relaxation in the laws as a step on the road to ruin, the beginning of an unstoppable slide into a dystopia where heroin is on supermarket shelves and the youth are sucked into storms of drug-induced psychosis. They've been watching too many Cheech and Chong films.

Yet another report has just been released declaring the war on drugs a "colossal failure".

The Australia 21 Alternatives to Prohibition report, the result of a roundtable of experts and young people, calls on governments to take cannabis out of the hands of criminals and regulate it themselves. They recommend that cannabis and ecstasy be decriminalised for people aged 16 and older, so they can buy drugs from a government supplier.

These reports keep coming out, and nothing changes. If the very eminent Global Commission on Drugs' findings - that the war has failed and that it's time for policies based on science, health and human rights instead of ideology and political convenience - made no impact, what will?

Alex Wodak, the director of St Vincent's Hospital's Alcohol and Drug Service and one of Australia21's directors, said they invited "prominent Australians who support a hardline approach to attend a meeting but all those approached declined".

They don't want to know, they don't want to enter the conversation because they know they have stupid policies, but they don't have the guts to change them. They need to be forced to take their heads out of the sand. Maybe our polities should go on one of their infamous junkets - sorry, study trips.

Smoke a joint in Amsterdam, witness the drug wars in Mexico, check out the reforms in Portugal and Switzerland. The reforms that are working. The evidence - there's not enough room to go through it here, just read the reports - shows that harm reduction works, and hard punishment doesn't.

Even if you don't support any kind of legalisation, consider this:

An ageing hippie, relaxing at a summer festival, passes a joint to a mate. A schmick advertising executive celebrates a promotion

with Moët and a line of cocaine. A dirty child in a dark alley injects heroin, her addiction, her escape - ultimately possibly her downfall.

Do any of these people deserve to go to prison? Would locking them up in any way help them or help society? The answer is no. Criminalising drug users doesn't work. It's not just futile and counter-productive, it's bloody expensive.

Drugs, like alcohol, can have serious health effects on some individuals or in some cases. They're a health issue, not a moral or political one. In plenty of cases using drugs may not even be an issue at all.

The situation is similar to the same-sex marriage issue; progressive reforms are constantly thwarted by noisy minorities, usually religion-based ones with ideologies instead of ideas.

They use slippery slope arguments and scare tactics; and unfortunately they work. Gutless governments and oppositions with no confidence in their own electoral security are too scared to rock the finely-balanced boat.

They'd rather lie in a darkened room with the doona pulled over their heads than face the bright lights outside.

Catholic Church endorses needle exchange

<http://www.talkingdrugs.org/catholic-church-endorses-needle-exchange-0>

ACatholic Bishop has caused controversy by going against traditional Catholic values and endorsing needle exchange as an efficient way to combat the Aids/HIV epidemic.

Bishop Hubbard of the Albany Diocese who serves as the chairman of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on International Justice and Peace has approved a proposal to distribute clean needles to heroin addicts in two urban areas of Albany, New York.

The proposal was made by a group of Catholic charities that are taking a new stance on such issues. Traditionally, the Catholic Church has opposed aspects of harm reduction such as needle exchange to combat the prevalence of blood borne diseases amongst intravenous drug users arguing that people should be encouraged to abstain from drug use instead. According to state Health Department studies, 50 percent of new AIDS cases were due to IV drug use in 1990. By 2004, after needle exchange programs were introduced, that statistic had dropped to 7 percent of new AIDS cases due to IV drug use. "This is a proven method used around the country, but there has been a huge gap in this area that nobody was stepping up to fill," said Angela Keller, executive director of AIDS services for Catholic Charities. She came to the agency after working five years at the AIDS Council. Last year, the Vatican stated that harm reduction is anti-life and that "so-called harm reduction leads to liberalisation of the use of drugs". However, what has been happening in the US demonstrates that in some places Catholic morals are evolving to confront modern societal problems.

Organisers of the program, called Project Safe Point, have met with neighbourhood association, drug users, police and Aids activists. The Social Services wing of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Albany has been vetting the program for the last five years and now it has received approval from the trustees and the board chairman Bishop Hubbard.

"I understand there will be questions, but this is common sense,"

said Sister Maureen Joyce, CEO of Catholic Charities. "I strongly believe in this. It will save lives." Needle exchange is becoming a more and more accepted response to the Aids crisis and last year the Obama administration lifted a federal ban on funding for needle exchange, which had previously only received funding from local and state funding. Although some people still regard needle exchange as an incentive for drug addicts to continue use, the number of needle exchanges continues to rise and the North American Syringe Exchange Network says that it distributed more than 30 million clean needles last year.

Many view the Catholic Church's moral objection to issues such as drug use as a frequent obstacle to curbing the HIV/Aids epidemic. The National Institute of Health estimates that in the United States, between fifteen and twenty percent of injection drug users have HIV and at least seventy percent have hepatitis. The Vatican states that the church globally provides nearly 27% of HIV/AIDS services or Catholic-based organisations; a more liberal view on needle exchanges would increase this figure. Sister Joyce also states "from a theological standpoint, we're not being faithful to our mission if we don't reach out to people addicted to drugs, too,"

Several members of the clergy and Catholic health professionals have also endorsed condom use as a method of HIV prevention despite the Vatican's objections. Rev. Jon Fuller, a Jesuit priest and HIV/AIDS physician at The Boston Medical Centre said, "a change in the Roman Catholic Church's views on contraception could significantly impact the spread of HIV. "

Time for a truce in the war on drugs?

Time for a truce in the war on drugs? Australia21's most recent report says the harm caused by drugs is magnified by our tough focus on law and order instead of health.

Over the course of 2012 a think tank called Australia21 has been trying to encourage Australians to question our prevailing 'tough on drugs' approach. Australia21's latest report is titled Alternatives to prohibition: How we can stop killing and criminalising young Australians. Will shifting the focus of illicit drugs from law and order to health lead to any improvements?

An audio of this very good ABC Law Report can be found at: <http://mpegmedia.abc.net.au/rn/audio/201209/DRUGS%20FULL.mp3>

Help Wanted for ACT Election

Anyone in the ACT who is able to help with FFDLR's Election campaign by pasting leaflets at shopping centres and other notice boards in their own districts in the ACT or distributing in any other way please phone 6254 2961.

The leaflet does not favour any particular party or candidate but it does say to voters:

"Before you vote

ask your local candidate if he or she supports a dialogue about alternatives to our prohibition drug laws.

A yes answer is a good reason to vote for that candidate."