



# Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform (ACT) Inc.

*committed to preventing tragedy that arises from illicit drug use*

## March Newsletter 2016

PO Box 7186, KALEEN ACT 2617

Email [president@ffdlr.org.au](mailto:president@ffdlr.org.au) Telephone (02) 6259 9899

Email [treasurer@ffdlr.org.au](mailto:treasurer@ffdlr.org.au) Telephone (02) 6258 9575

Web [www.ffdlr.org.au](http://www.ffdlr.org.au)

Twitter @FFDLR

Hi Everyone,

Drug Reform continues to be high on the agenda both internationally and locally – although not as much media coverage as one could hope for.

Before looking at what has been happening here are some dates for the diary:

- **Monthly meeting at 7:30 at St Ninian,s Uniting Church in Lynham on the 24th of March at 7:30 pm.**
- **"Breaking the Ice in our Community Forum - Tuesday 5th April 6pm - 8.30pm, Bicentennial Hall, 253 Crawford St, Queanbeyan. We are running a stall at this event. Anyone who can help with this would be most welcome.**
- **Paperchain Book Promotion in Manuka- Thursday 7th April, 6pm. More details below.**

### Paperchain Promotion

Do come along to this event where Brian and Marion will discuss the Drug Law Wars with renowned Canberra Journalist Graham Downie as part of a promotion by Paperchain. A flyer for the event is enclosed with this newsletter. It promises to be a very interesting evening so do come along if you can make it.

### Meeting with Brendan Smyth

Peter and Bill met with Brendan Smyth – MLA for Brindabella for the Liberal Party. The meeting took place at the Legislative Assembly building on the 7th

of March. We presented Brendan with information about the aims of our group as well as some of the presentations from the Australian Parliamentary Drug Summit (see below). We had a very useful exchange of views on engaging the Liberal Party on Drug Law Reform.

### Australian Parliamentary Drug Summit

Brian attended the recent drug summit instigated by the Greens. He has provided the following report:

#### *Australian Parliamentary Drug Summit*

2 March 2016 at Parliament House, Canberra

This summit was organised by the Parliamentary Group for Drug Policy and Law Reform. This cross party group, co-convened by Senator Richard Di Natale (Australian Greens), Sharman Stone (LNP) and Melissa Parke (ALP) recognises that our national approach to tackling the devastating impact of drugs on individuals and families has failed.

The summit was opened by Senator the Hon Fiona Nash, Deputy Leader of the National Party and Minister for Rural Health. Following the welcome to everyone, she listed the government's successes. She acknowledged the devastation brought to families and friends and went on to say the Government's commitment to fixing the problem is unrelenting. What she believes and what was reality seemed to be two different things as was

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revealed by later presentations. She referred to the need to "smash the drug dealers model" which carried an echo of the "smash the people smugglers' model" of the Abbott government rhetoric.

Senator Nash was followed by Steven Jones MP, Assistant Shadow Minister for Health. He strongly believed that present policies are not working and that it should be a health matter. He also said that and money being put into law enforcement is not having any impact on the supply of drugs. He asked, "Why are we turning drug problems into crime"?

The first presenter was Dr Caitlin Hughes, criminologist and Senior Research Fellow of the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, who spoke about components of a good drug policy. It was a very useful presentation, particularly in learning that the policy Australia has adopted is the one with the least evidence to support it.

Topics included:

- a. What would a good policy look like?
  - b. What can we learn from history?
  - c. What can we learn from other countries?
    - i. Portugal
    - ii. USA/Uruguay (Cannabis)
    - iii. Sweden
- New Zealand – NPS

Dr Hughes presented a table which gave the scale of impact (1-5, 1 being the lowest) of the different elements of how governments deal with drugs:

Supply reduction and law enforcement	1 star
Prevention	2 stars
Harm reduction	3 stars
Treatment	5 stars

Each presentation ended with a panel discussion and Q and A session.

In the Q & A that followed this first session I pointed out that a good policy was one that included families. I said that there was little point in sending someone home from treatment when the family had no knowledge of what the treatment was or how it

could help the process. It was sending the person back to the same environment as the one they had left. Families needed more than the simplistic "talk to your kids about drugs".

Slides of her presentation and others can be found on the summit website <http://drugpolicyreform.com.au/>.

Professor Simon Lenton, Deputy Director at the National Drug Research Institute and part time clinical psychologist was the next presenter and he spoke about emerging challenges and issues

His topics included:

- a. How do we deal with emerging issues
- c. Barriers and enablers of effective treatment
- d. Unintended consequences from policy
- e. System/structural issues

Paul Deitze was the third speaker whose topics included:

- a) How do we deal with emerging issues?
- b) How effective is our current approach?
- c) Lessons from our current approach to tobacco and alcohol control
- d) Unintended consequences
- e) Diversion, safe injecting facilities, etc.
- f) Various perspectives:  
Police/Justice/Health/User

An amusing anecdote came from a panel member Dr Marion Jauncey, Director of the Medically Supervised Injecting Centre in King's Cross, who had invited all NSW members of parliament to visit her medically supervised Injecting centre. An MP who was not in favour of the centre asked her, "How can you as a doctor allow people to use drugs here knowing that they are of unknown quality and purity and potentially harmful to the user.. After a little thought she replied: "That is why we are here".

The final session was without a speaker but sought views from the expert panel. One comment was that 5 - 6 years ago at various drug policy committees talk was about how tough one could be on drugs, now it has shifted to health and social issues. There was a call for no more money to be spent on prisons.

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And a call for MPs to not be afraid of funding something that works.

Delegates were asked to offer one specific thing which they would advise Australian members of Parliament around drug policy. Most were for more equitable distribution of funding, more treatment service and continuing dialog.

My one thing was that in FFDLR's 20 years we had heard it all before and that what was now needed was a lot more action.

A draft declaration was produced and delegates and other interested people were urged to read and sign and offer suggestions on the declaration.

Since families were not specifically included in the declaration I offered the following suggestion:

"Actively involve families in treatment processes and support them with tools that keep their families connected."

**I urge readers of this brief report to log into the Drug Policy Reform website and suggest the above inclusion for the declaration.**

Overall the main themes of the summit were that Australia should move away from the criminal justice model to a health and social model, that criminal sanctions should not apply for drug use, and that funding should be more balanced between law enforcement and treatment such that treatment services can be increased substantially.

I provided Alana McTiernan and Professor Bau Kilmer with a copy each of our Drug Law Wars book, the first to take back to WA, the second to take back to USA.

The summit was a great initiative by Senator Di Natale, lots of good discussion and ideas for moving forward. We now need to make sure the discussion continues and action takes place. I think what Gino Vumbaca communicated at the end of the summit is very pertinent. **He said what he would like to say to the politicians is "don't be afraid, stop being scared of being innovative, stop being scared of doing what we know will work. speak about people as people".**

Brian McConnell

## **Letter to the Canberra Times**

There seems to have been little reporting of this summit. It was very valuable that Marion had the following letter published in the Canberra Times on the 7th of March.

*Dear Editor*

*An historic event took place in our Australian Parliament House today. Historic for two reasons. One it was a first National Summit on Drugs and two for the first time it called for reform of our drug laws - not for a 'get tougher on drugs' approach but rather for a more evidence based approach based on health and social concerns.*

*Decriminalisation (which is not legalisation!) and more equitable distribution of government funds was high in the discussion. For families this brings hope. Under decriminalisation families would no longer need to fear that their children would receive a criminal record for drug use. Decriminalisation would help reduce the shame, stigma and isolation felt by so many families. And more funds in treatment would mean those in trouble receive the support they need.*

*As reported by Prof Caitlin Hughes at the summit, her research shows that present funding does not equate with what works. Treatment, with the most positive impact, she allots 5 stars, then 3 stars to harm reduction, 2 stars to prevention and 1 star to supply reduction and law enforcement. And yet law enforcement gets the lion-share of the funding. This is not a problem for law enforcement but a problem that needs addressing by our policy makers.*

*A breath of fresh air blew through our Parliament today. Prohibition is now seen universally as causing more harm than it has ever solved. The elephant in the room can no longer be ignored. Let's give support to the politicians who organised this momentous event and to those politicians who attended. The website is [drugpolicyreform.com.au](http://drugpolicyreform.com.au).*

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## **Local Greens Support**

Shane Rattenbury – the Greens MLA for Molonglo – was reported in the City News as signing the Canberra Declaration:

<http://citynews.com.au/2016/the-canberra-declaration-on-drug-law-reform/>

Shane is quoted as saying:

*“It is clear that our current approach to drug policy is not working,” Shane said.*

*“Regardless of your position on the issue, the truth is quite a number of Australians take drugs. And that number is increasing.*

*“Federal and State Governments are investing more and more money into law enforcement, but this is not reducing the prevalence of drugs or the negative social and health impacts of drugs, and it is straining our criminal justice system.*

*“All the evidence shows that focussing on treatment and harm reduction is the most effective way to reduce the prevalence of use, and reduce the broader impacts of drug use such as crime and health impacts. The law enforcement approach is expensive, ineffective and has a high risk of producing counterproductive results.*

*“While the majority of the funding is spent on law enforcement, only about 2% of the \$1.7 billion Australia is pouring into tackling drugs is going to harm reduction efforts. Our focus is all back to front.*

*“I have signed on to the Canberra Declaration, which calls for a broadening of illicit drug policy in Australia and focuses on putting health and community safety first.*

As a result of Shane's support for a change in Drug Laws we have requested an interview to discuss the initiatives further and to see how Families and Friends can play a role in discussions at a local level.

## **Maintaining the paradigm shift**

The fundamental change that Families and Friends seeks is the decriminalisation of drugs for personal

use – as has happened in Portugal. Brian came back to this tenant and linked it to the Drug Summit is the following letter published in the Canberra Times of the 14th of March.

### **Not the answer**

*The problem with judges is that they often only see life through the lens of the Criminal Justice System. (“Judge urges ACT to use ‘smart justice’ and adopt drug court”, March 9, P2). Californian judge Peggy Hora may think it “smart justice” but it is still a costly one-eyed view.*

*More and more thoughtful people, including police commissioners, are realising law enforcement cannot solve our drug problem and, in fact, makes matters worse.*

*A national drug summit held recently at Parliament House in Canberra, attended by many experts in the field from law enforcement to drug policy researchers, health professionals, politicians and economists were of the opinion that law enforcement is very expensive with little or no positive outcomes.*

*The summit ranked law enforcement a mere “one” for effectiveness, but health and social treatment a top of the scale five.*

*The declaration at the end of the Summit stated in part “Putting health and community safety first requires a fundamental broadening of illicit drug policy in Australia away from failed punitive enforcement to proven health and social interventions”.*

There is concern from civil liberties groups that the upcoming UN summit on drugs will also miss the point. The following link is somewhat depressing as it indicates that at an international level the message is not getting through. It seems that the UN is still trying to engage in the fantasy of a drug-free world!

<http://idpc.net/alerts/2016/03/civil-society-statement-on-the-ungass#.VudGJqI5psk.email>

The Australian Drug Foundation is a member of the International Drug Policy Consortium who produced this report.

On a positive note I can advise that Families and Friends were able to add their name to a letter to President Obama that was written by David Borden, Executive Director of the organisation Stop the Drug

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War based in Washington DC. The aims of this organisation aligns closely with ours.

<http://stopthedrugwar.org>

The key message from the letter is this:

*In April, the United Nations will hold a "General Assembly Special Session on the World Drug Problem" (UNGASS), its highest-level drug policy meeting since 1998. US agencies have played a leading role on the global stage as UNGASS approaches, promoting important agendas such as alternatives to incarceration, public health approaches, and human rights reforms.*

***In key respects, however, we the undersigned NGOs believe the current US position for UNGASS takes a short-term approach, stopping short of the crucial reforms called for by UN agencies and US allies, while failing to address new realities. We believe a stronger US stance on these issues would leave a legacy in global drug policy that is better aligned to the direction you've steered domestic policy***

Also included is:

*We commend the US statement that "[p]eople who use drugs should receive support, treatment and protection, rather than be punished." To this end we urge the US to:*

☺ *Explicitly endorse harm reduction – a necessary element in any public health approach to substance issues – and call for a shifting of resources to fund harm reduction in particular, as well as voluntary traditional substance use services. Among the bodies calling for evidence-based measures to prevent the spread of blood-borne diseases are WHO, UNODC, UNAIDS, UNDP, the UN General Assembly, the Commission on Narcotic Drugs, the European Union, and PEPFAR.1*

We will provide a report of the outcome of UNGASS2016 in subsequent newsletters.

## **Dance Party Drug Testing Crowd Funding.**

It was reported in the Sydney Morning Herald on the 5th of March that Dr David Caldicott and Dr Alex Wodak are intending to set up pill testing facilities at

forthcoming Sydney music festivals.

<http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/crowdfunding-site-to-harness-support-for-nsw-pill-testing-trial-20160305-gnbbp4.html>

A crowd funding program is to be launched. There has been no further news of this but should a crowd funding site be established we will advise FFDLR group members via email.

## **Farewell to Annie Madden from the leadership of AIVIL**

A very important event in the life of those of us striving for a better and humane drug policy occurred on Thursday 17 March at University House in Canberra where many gathered to farewell Annie Madden who is retiring from heading the peak Australian users group, the Australian Injecting and Illicit Drug Users League. There are a lot of parallels between our two organisations. Annie was appointed the Executive Officer of AIVIL 20 years ago about the time that FFDLR was founded. She recalled her nervousness in attending her first high-level meeting as a 21-year-old novice leader in this hard fought, contentious world of drug policy.

Tony Trimmingham, who spoke at the event, also worked with Annie in the early years of the New South Wales Drug Summit and establishment of the medically supervised injecting room in King's Cross. The two fronted hostile media. Tony made the point that for him as a bereaved parent such experiences had their cruel, rough moments but nothing to those that Annie experienced as the spokesperson for such a disdained group.

Indeed, as Annie said in her speech in reply, advocacy for drug users, those most harmed by drug policies, to be heard and respected has been and remains a daily struggle for AIVIL.

The marginalisation of drug users as worthless junkies is the essence of what is wrong with our unjust and stupidly counter-productive drug policy; unjust because it fails to respect the worth of drug users as human beings and stupid because it is only with the co-operation and insights of drug users themselves that the expensive harms around drug

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use such as the spread of blood-borne viruses can be contained and eliminated. Listening to the voices of drug users as well as those of their families is just plain common sense and common decency.

Bill Bush 18/3/2016

## **New FFDLR Computer**

Families and Friends has purchased a new laptop and Brian has worked extremely diligently so that it can provide the main administrative jobs required by the organisation. If you received the newsletter electronically it will have been sent via the new computer.

The computer will allow flexibility of tasks within the FFDLR thus making the organisation more robust to changes of office holders.

## **Contact Details and subscriptions.**

Please fill in the attached form (mail) - or subsequent email so that we have all your details up to date. Note that subscriptions are due at the end of April.