

MEDIA RELEASE

**NCA INDEPENDENCE GONE:
NATIONAL CRIME AUTHORITY BROUGHT TO HEEL**

Yesterday's bargain between the States and Commonwealth deprives the Parliaments and people of Australia of an independent voice that will report uncomfortable facts and fight crime without fear or favour.

"The agreement to replace the National Crime Authority with an Australian Crime Commission is a victory of political malice over the national interest," said Bill Bush, Vice-President of Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform.

"There is no other explanation," he said, "for the Commonwealth's push to abolish a perfectly good federal organisation that Australia needs more than ever."

The NCA was established in 1984 as a standing Royal Commission with the statutory independence and tight governance that is essential to get at the truth and fight ever more sophisticated and well-resourced crime. It was a deliberate decision to give the NCA its structure because a series of Royal Commissions had revealed that the influence of organised crime had penetrated police forces and politics.

"The assertion of Mr Ellison, the federal Justice Minister, that the new body would be more 'streamlined' stretches credibility to breaking point," Mr Bush said. "A body controlled by a board of all Police Commissioners and three or four other agency heads is crime fighting by committee. Organised crime bosses will be celebrating."

"Mr Ellison should well know that past attempts to get law enforcement agencies to determine priorities and co-ordinate resources have come to little because of turf squabbles. This problem will now infect the operation of the new Commission."

Consistent with its statutory mandate to report on criminal activity and recommend reforms, Mr Garry Crook, the Chair of the NCA, last August reported that the illicit drug trade was "continuing to flourish", that law enforcement agencies were seizing only a small percentage of drugs, that the battle could not "be won by law enforcement alone or in partnership with the health sector." The scale of the problem, he said, demanded the "highest attention of government and the community". Indeed the NCA has been saying to anyone who will listen that there is an urgent need for "a co-ordinated and holistic approach".

The new administrative structure will ensure that politically unpalatable assessments such as this will not emerge from the new Commission.

"It is a great loss for Australians," Mr Bush continued, "that the States have taken the bait offered by the Commonwealth of shared control of the new body while believing they achieved victory because they succeeded in increasing federal funding for it."

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Contacts: Bill Bush (02) 6257 1786

Brian McConnell (02) 6254 2961