

PRESIDENT'S REPORT 2017

Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform PRESIDENT'S ANNUAL REPORT 2017

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Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform PRESIDENT'S ANNUAL REPORT 2017

During 2017 Families and Friends was still finding its feet after the loss of Brian McConnell with whom the organisation has been so much identified from the time of its establishment. That's not quite correct because with Brian came Marion and with Marion came Brian. Marion who understandably would have liked nothing better than to have waved farewell to the organisation, allowed herself to be drafted into the vital role of secretary. The most gratifying event of the year was the recognition of Marion. On Friday 28 April the Governor General invested her with Membership of the Order of Australia. It is fitting that she joined Brian as a recipient of that national award. Marion is firm that though we support each other, we are not after sympathy. Our passion is justice: to right a profound wrong.

And we are getting there. Alex Wodak, the president of the Australian Drug Law Reform Foundation with which Families and Friends has always been associated, reckons that 2017 has been a bumper year for drug law reform what with

- ACT Government approval of pill testing,
- Victorian Government commitment to establish a medically supervised injecting room in Melbourne;
- Support for the Victorian initiative from the News Corporation *Herald-Sun*;
- progress in making medical cannabis available; and
- growing community support for less punitive solutions. The 2016 Household survey reported that:

"Except for cannabis, the most appropriate perceived action for someone found in possession of small quantities of drugs, was referral to treatment or an education program" and

"For cannabis the most popular action was a caution, warning or no action and this increased in 2016".

Yes, we've made progress but we're not there yet. This is not the time to back off. We need to make a final push to put ourselves out of business!

Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform is a national Organisation

Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform may be small but it has big ambitions to change drug laws across the country where our membership is drawn from. We were established in the Australian Capital Territory in 1995. For the reason that the bulk of our members are drawn from that jurisdiction, we pay particularly close attention to its affairs. Even so, with the federal parliament located here, national issues are in our face. Thus most of our work has involved lobbying ACT and Commonwealth

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authorities. Please never forget though, our national reach. We have made submissions to enquiries in Queensland, Western Australia and New South Wales and this last year gave a lot of our attention to Victoria with the assistance of our Victorian members, Brenda Irwin and Jo Wade who both bravely and movingly related to the important, broad enquiry of the Victorian Parliament into drug law reform. Indeed on 21 November 2016 just a few days before last year's annual general meeting Jo Wade participated on our behalf in a community forum in Melbourne organised by the Rationalist Society of Australia. We owe both Brenda & Jo special thanks. If you live outside the Australian Capital Territory please also draw our attention to opportunities that may arise for Families and Friends to influence your local authorities.

ORGANISATION

Committee for 2017 – ELECTED AT AGM ON 25 Nov 2016

A measure of the stress with which Families and Friends began the year was the difficulty at the Annual General Meeting on 25 November 2016 to fill all positions. The offices of secretary and treasurer were vacant. In these circumstances Peter Taylor volunteered to continue his leadership role as president. Bill Bush continued as vice president and Marion McConnell reluctantly put up her hand to take on the secretaryship. Faithful long-time members John Ley and Joan Westaway allowed themselves to be drafted as ordinary committee members. Peter's committee thus lacked a treasurer and a third ordinary committee member as required by the Rules of the Association. Without solid organisational support provided by those who volunteer to serve on the committee, the Association's goal of better drug laws and policies could not be achieved.

It was with great relief that at a committee meeting on 30 January, Pat Varga allowed herself to be drafted as Treasurer to succeed Bob McFadden and Sally Taylor joined the committee. We now had a full complement of office bearers and committee members.

After a crowded half year of activities Peter Taylor announced to the committee on 22 June his intention to resign with effect from 31 July. He wrote to the committee that engaging with FFDLR activities was "seriously impacting on my well-being." In his year and a half at the helm Peter gave it his all. He brought clarity of thought organisational skills, grasp of evidence and a capacity to advocate. The pinnacle of his achievement was the undertaking he secured from Andrew Barr, at an ACTCOSS forum on 28 August during the 2016 election campaign. In answer to Peter's question, the ACT Chief Minister gave an assurance that a Labor government would consider further decriminalising personal drug use in the ACT. Peter kept Families and Friends a vital and an influential presence at a time when it might otherwise have ceased to exist.

At its meeting on 20 July the Committee again exercised its authority to fill casual vacancies in appointing me as President thus leaving vacant the office of vice-president.

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Under Peter the Association adopted as its top priority the introduction of heroin assisted treatment.. This was particularly appropriate for the 20th year after the cancellation by the Howard government of a heroin trial even though it had been approved by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG).

These various appointments since the last annual general meeting were made by the committee in accordance with its authority to fill casual vacancies. It is now the opportunity for the Association as a whole at the present AGM to express its views on these organisational matters.

FFDLR meetings

For the convenience of the committee members, John Ley kindly offered his place as a venue for committee meetings. These were held on 30 January, 12 April, 20 July and 1 November.

The more usual format of meetings has been meeting open to the entire membership at St Ninian's Uniting Church in Lyneham. Such meetings took place on 23 March, 22 June and 28 September

ADVOCACY

Meetings with politicians and significant people

9 December 2016 – Jarrah Robbins, policy adviser to Shane Rattenbury, the Greens Minister responsible for Corrections and Mental Health. Peter and Bill urged the minister to introduce heroin assisted treatment rather than establish an ACT drug court.

Friday, 24 February 2017 - Carrie Fowlie and Amanda Bode with Peter & Sally Taylor, Marion McConnell & Bill Bush. The discussion covered:

Drug and alcohol services and Drug policy advice within a restructured Department of Health

the promised new ACT drug strategy; and

Implications of the separation of responsibility of mental health from the broader health portfolio.

Thursday, 16 February 2017 – Gino Vumbaca of Harm Reduction Australia with Peter, Marion & Bill. Discussion of a trial of pill testing in the ACT.

Friday, 24 February 2017 - Carrie Fowlie and Amanda Bode of ATODA met Peter, Bill and Marion.. Discussion covered:

- reorganisation of the Health Department,
- the ACT Drug Strategy.

Thursday, 27 April 2017 –Meegan Fitzharris (MLA) Minister for Health with Peter Taylor, Joan Westaway & Bill Bush discussion covered:

- The tribulations experienced by drug users in securing treatment;

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- The harsh judgmental attitudes particularly towards women;
- the delay in finalising a new ACT Alcohol, Tobacco and Other Drugs Strategy.
- the three pillars of drug policy, namely supply reduction, demand reduction and harm reduction;
- the proposed drug court

Tuesday 20 June 2017 - Gordon Ramsay, Attorney-General with Peter, Marion & Bill discussed covered:

- Drug use and crime;
- Prohibition as a stimulant of illicit drug supply;
- Decriminalisation;
- Drug Court merely an intensified drug diversion scheme.

Wednesday 21 June 2017 - Rachael Stephen-Smith, Minister for Community Services and Social Inclusion and Minister for Disability, Children and Youth with Marion & Bill discussed:

- The harms of drug policy and their impact on all the many portfolios for which she is responsible including disability, child protection, youth justice, indigenous affairs, suicide, multicultural affairs and workplace health and safety;
- Strip searching at Bimberi.
- The demotion of the Ngunnawal Centre from a drug rehabilitation service to a wellness centre; and
- Child protection and the challenge of crystal methamphetamine.

Friday 4 August 2017 – Travis Gilbert, CEO, Shelter ACT. Joan & Bill discussed the association between drug dependency (including drug policy) and homelessness

Thursday, 21 September 2017 - Justine Saunders, Chief Police Officer with Bill & Marion discussed:

- Pill testing;
- Greater use of expiation notices (SCONS) for offences of use and possession;
- heroin assisted treatment as a crime reduction measure; and
- Testing for drug driving.

Friday 29th September 2017 – John Ryan, CEO, Penington Institute in Melbourne, and Bill talked about the introduction of a Needle Syringe Program in the ACT Prison.

Wednesday 8th November 2017 - Jeremy Hanson, Shadow Attorney-General with Marion mostly about his hand in stopping the pill testing trial in the ACT:

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- the ineffectiveness of prohibition; and
- the harm caused by existing drug policy

Submissions to and appearances before Parliamentary and other official inquiries

Victorian Inquiry into drug law reform:

Submission on 15 March 2017 to the Inquiry into Drug Law Reform of the Law Reform, Road and Community Safety Committee of the Parliament of Victoria.

Appearance of Marion before the committee in Sydney on 23 May 2017 in her capacity as member of the Uniting Church of Australia, Synod of NSW and ACT.

Appearance of Brenda Irwin, Jo Wade and Bill before the committee on 18th September.

ACT Pill Testing Working Group

On Friday 23rd June 2017, Peter and Bill appeared before the ACT Working Group on Pill Testing

26 June 2017 Submission to the ACT Health Pill Testing Working Group

Forums and Symposiums

ATODA Symposium on 24 May 2017 Promoting Safety and Prioritising Domestic and Family Violence in the ACT Alcohol and Other Drug Sector – Marion attended.

Canberra Conversation on Thursday 27th July 2017 on “Heroin prescription: the need for Rational Policy” convened by the Institute of Governance and Policy Analysis (IGPA) at the University of Canberra, at the Theo Notaras Multicultural Centre. It involved a discussion between Dr Marianne Jauncey and David McDonald facilitated by Michael Moore, CEO of the Australian Public Health Association, reflecting on the abandonment 20 years before of the ACT Heroin Prescription Trial.

Launches

Peter attended the re-launch on 20 March in Melbourne of a novel by a former member, Steffie Wallace, *The August Months*, based on her experience of her son's heroin use.

Monday, 20th March 2017. Bill and Marion attended the launch in NSW Parliament House of the latest Australia21 Report – *Can Australia respond to drugs more effectively and safely?*

Co-operation with other organisations

ACT Council of Social Service (ACTCOSS)

ACT. Hepatitis Resource Centre

Australian Drug Law Reform Foundation. Bill attended a dinner on Friday 10 November at the Wayside Chapel in Potts Point, Sydney to "Celebrate the best year yet for drug law reform in Australia"

Canberra Mental Health Forum - Bill attended monthly meetings held at the Cook Community Centre.

Carers' ACT on Thursday 13th July 2017 Marion and Bill attended a full day symposium on *Volunteering in the Digital World* organised by the Carers' ACT.

Civil Liberties Australia

Federal Association for Accepting Drug Treatment and Humane Drug Policy (Germany)
(Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft für akzeptierende Drogenarbeit und humane Drogenpolitik)

Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform and our German counterpart exchange messages on the occasion of each other's remembrance ceremony.

Harm Reduction Australia

Mental Health Community Coalition

Restorative Community Network

Rationalist Society of Australia in Melbourne

Uniting Church and Uniting, including the ACT Presbytery Social Justice Group

Volunteering and Contact ACT

Tuesday 19 September 2017 - Volunteering Expo 2017: Pat Varga, Joan Westaway and Marion attended this Expo at the Southern Cross Club, Woden. This was an opportunity to promote our organisation while at the same time attracting volunteers. It was a very successful event which brought several people to our stall to discuss how they could help. Bill and Marion have since interviewed potential volunteers and one has commenced working on the website.

Speaking engagements

Tuesday, 29 August 2017 - Bill participated in a panel discussion on drug policy at Monash University. It was organised by the Monash Student Association

8 September 2017 - Marion spoke at the fund raising event -Raising Hope Gala for the Parramatta Mission of the Uniting Church.

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9 October 2017 - Marion also spoke at a monthly meeting of Calvary Hospital Auxilliary. Pat Varga arranged the engagement.

Co-operation with Uniting

Uniting workshop in Sydney city on 21 August – Bill and Marion invited.

21 August 2017 - Uniting Drug Law Reform Forum in Parramatta– Marion invited as speaker.

Significant Correspondence

Letter to the Hon Lisa Neville MP, Minister for Police, Victoria, expressing concern about the government's plan for drug searches at music festivals in Victoria – 21 June. A response was received on 10 July.

Guest Speakers at FFDLR meetings

Meetings with guest speakers open to anyone interested took place in the familiar venue of the William's room at the St Ninian's Uniting Church hall in Lyneham except that, because the Hall was otherwise in use, we gathered in the church itself to hear David McDonald.

Thursday, 23 March, when we heard Sharon Tuffin (CEO of Karralika) and Dawn Bainbridge (Manager of Residential Services)

Thursday 22 June. David David recalled that he had last spoken to a Families & Friends meeting in May 2000. He spoke of his long involvement in issues involving drugs and of international developments gleaned from his recent attendance at the International Society for the Study of Drug Policy (ISSDP) held in Denmark in May.

Thursday 28th September. Chris Gough of the Canberra Harm Minimisation Alliance (CAHMA) spoke on the situation in Canberra from the perspective of drug users.

All the speakers stimulated lively and interesting discussion. For an organisation focused upon advocacy it is important for us to keep informed of developments in the continually shifting drug scene and evolving policy and social environment.

Remembrance Ceremony – 23rd October

The day, the tree in bloom and the glittering lake were exquisitely beautiful. Jo Smith's address was unforgettable. She related the story of her Tim who died in a police chase. It was a hugely powerful illustration of the cruel, collateral damage that drug policy can cause. Meegan Fitzharris, the Health Minister, generously acknowledged the importance of the long standing presence of Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform. She referred to the probing discussions that we had had when we met earlier in the year and how she had come to doubt the effectiveness of drug policy from her New Zealand police father. The focus of the address of the Rev. Ken Perrin, Church of Christ Minister who read the long list of names, was of genuine

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concern and comfort for the many grieving. Alison Procter's music complemented the mood of reflection and community.

MEDIA

As an advocacy group, Families and Friends strive to draw media attention to the inadequacies of existing drug policy and to the presence of voices of families calling for reform. It has become much more difficult for the Association to gain media attention. This was evident at the remembrance ceremony when our media release about the record number of overdose deaths in the ACT failed to be reported in the *Canberra Times* even though a reporter and a photographer from that paper were present at the ceremony. The sad deduction to be drawn from that silence is that continuing overdose deaths are so normal as to be un-newsworthy. Similarly, several opinion pieces that Bill submitted to mainstream papers during the year were not published. There was more success with radio (Marion was interviewed twice) and having letters to the editor published. Of 17 letters that Bill submitted to the *Canberra Times*, 13 were published.

Media releases

10 May 2017 - Drug Testing of welfare recipients, and quarantining payment of those who test positive unless they engage with treatment. Criticised as a retrograde step as it is tantamount to compulsory drug treatment which is far less effective than voluntary treatment of which there is a shortage.

20 October 2017 - Ceremony remembers a record number of overdose deaths

18 November 2017 - Potential to save lives at dance festival stopped

Media interviews:

Monday, 20th March 2017 Marion interviewed by 2XX at the launch of the Australia 21 report in Parliament House, Sydney.

30 October 2017 - Marion was interviewed about the cancellation of pill testing on the 2CC afternoon program.

Letters to the Editor

Members had letters published in *The Canberra Times* on many different aspects of drug policy, namely:

Dec 1 2016 - Drug supply prospers with prohibition - Bill

Jan 23 - 2017 - suicide prevention - Bill

Jan 24 – New Drug Plan Needed – Marion

Apr 8 – Making drugs boring – Bill

Apr 24 – Inaction on drugs – Bill

June 16 - Decriminalisation of cannabis - Bill

July 6 – Prison capacity – Bill

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July 26 - Prison NSP - Bill
Aug. 22 - Doctor shopping & prescribed opioids - Bill
Aug 24 – Drugs test is a fail – Bill
Oct. 4 - Prohibition flawed - Drug Testing - Bill
Oct 14 - Criminalising our kids - Harm reduction – Bill
Nov. 12 - Heroin Assisted Treatment - Bill

Media articles

The Mad Merry-go-round of Starving Welfare Recipients off Drugs, *New Matilda*, November 10, 2017 (Bill).

Website and Social media

Marion has taken to social media like a blackbird to a bird bath. She has discovered a hitherto under recognised twittering talent. On the latest count she had sent 936 tweets, was following 120 and had 313 followers. Our new volunteers are already raising the web profile of Families and Friends.

The Twitter handle is: @FFDLR

Newsletters

To tailor our cloth to our capacities, we have ceased to issue a newsletter every month. In future we plan to produce one every two months. Editing assistance would be most welcome. Since the previous Annual General Meeting five newsletters were issued, in November 2016, March 2017, June 2017, September 2017 and November 2017.

Bill Bush

TURNER ACT 2612

21 November 2017