

President's Annual Report 2006

(to be presented at the November AGM)

Introduction

This eleventh President's report covers the 12 month period from November 2005 to November 2006.

I would like to thank all those who contributed during the year to the group's activities by writing letters, writing submissions, visiting MPs and others, participating in media events, addressing groups and meetings, assisting with various organised activities, participating and providing support and attending meetings. I would like especially to thank my office bearers John Ley, vice president; Pat Varga, treasurer; and Cynthia Groundwater, secretary. I also thank Marion McConnell for her organising work and support, and St Ninian's Church for the use of its hall. Again some excellent work has been undertaken for FFDLR by Bill Bush and I thank him for his tireless efforts.

Events of significance

Internationally there have been some positive signs of change.

Canada, on the doorstep of the USA, has opened a medically supervised injecting centre. Great Britain, in one small area adopted a needle and syringe program in a remand centre. Also in Britain recently it was reported that a group of six drug-addicted inmates and former prisoners have been awarded out-of-court payments from the government for what they say was "cold turkey" treatment in jail - a breach of their human rights.

In our region it has been less favourable: in Singapore a young Australian man was executed and in Indonesia six young men now have been sentenced to death. A number of others are serving long prison sentences. It has to be noted that representations made by the Australian government against the imposition of the death penalty has been ineffective.

In Australia: There has been a government advertising campaign of the zero tolerance nature focused on cannabis even though use of cannabis has been declining for a number of years. The federal government has been praising itself by wrongly claiming to have caused the heroin shortage in 2000 but has ignored the signs and the warnings that they had received as far back as 1996 that methamphetamine use was on the increase. Until recently the government appears not to have noticed that the use of methamphetamine, and stronger variations such as base and ice have become more fashionable.

The SA health minister has expressed a view that to talk about and debate drugs and drug policy is to encourage drug use. If it cannot be discussed and debated there can be no change for the better.

The Kings Cross Medically Supervised Injecting Place trial, which was extended for a further 4 years in 2003, is still functioning well. It has received the support of many in the community, the police, church, medical and health authorities. Unfortunately the current opposition leader has vowed to close the centre if his party should be elected.

In the ACT the government is proceeding with the construction of its first prison – the Alexander Maconochie Centre. Many claims have been made that the new prison will be a model to look up to. However, indications of that happening at this stage are not promising.

Involvement in the community or other organisations

FFDLR is represented as follows:

The Opiate Program – ACT: John Ley.

Crime Prevention Committee: Bill Bush.

ACTCOSS Corrections Coalition: Bill Bush, Brian McConnell

ACT Alcohol and Other Drugs Strategy Implementation & Evaluation Committee: Brian McConnell continued his representation on this group.

DIRECTIONS: Brian McConnell is a member of the Board of this drug user support and education service agency.

ADCA Reference Group: John Ley is represented on the Prevention and Community Education Reference Group.

Representations

FFDLR members met with and made representations to the following:

- Brian McConnell, John Ley and Marion McConnell met with the new ACT Chief Police Officer for an exchange of views.
- Meeting with ACT Health Minister 1 February 2006
- Bill Bush and Brian McConnell met with the ACT Chief Minister's chief of staff and discussed a press release issued by the Prime Minister about a proposal relating to cannabis and mental health that was to be raised at a COAG meeting.
- Brian McConnell took up in correspondence with Senator Ellison the issue of police co-operation with Indonesia and the Bali Nine.
- Brian & Marion McConnell, John Ley and Joan Westaway met with Karen Lenihan the C.E.O of the ACT Alcohol and Drug Programme to discuss changes that were being implemented in that service.
- Marion McConnell & Bill Bush met with Bishop Pat Power to seek assistance in inviting Father Peter Norden, a Jesuit Priest from Melbourne, to be a Speaker at our Drug Action Week forum.
- Marion McConnell & Bill Bush met Senator Lyn Allison in October 06 to discuss the remembrance ceremony and Commonwealth drug issues and with Bishop Pat Power concerning the remembrance ceremony.
- Bill Bush, and Brian and Marion McConnell met with ACT Health Minister, Katie Gallagher to discuss health policies and services in the ACT prison.

Submissions

FFDLR made the following submissions during the year:

- Submission to the Project Management Group on the National Cannabis Strategy.
- Submission and oral presentation to the Inquiry to the Joint Committee on the Australian Crime Commission into Amphetamines and other Synthetic Drugs.
- Submission and oral presentation to the Joint Parliamentary Committee of the Australian Crime Commission. A Supplementary Submission was provided following the oral presentation.
- Submission to the Australian Government Attorney Generals Office about the review of Australia's mutual assistance

Conferences, Seminars and Inquiries Attended

- Bill Bush attended workshop at University House on restorative justice and young people in November 2005
- Several members attended the meeting of the Australian Parliamentary Group for Drug Law reform. The speakers included, Mal Washer Zero-tolerance: a Practitioner's Perspective, Brian McConnell (Introduction), Dr Andrew Byrne (Medical Aspects of Drug Law Reform), Rev'd Harry Herbert (Medically Supervised Injecting Centre), David McDonald (At the frontiers of Harm Reduction - Prisoners' Rights to Health and Safety).

- Brian and Marion McConnell attended a seminar on Grandparents parenting grandchildren because of drugs.
- Brian & Marion attended the Drug Policy Modelling Project in Sydney. The Project looks at the bases for developing Drug Policies using research and evidence and how to get best value for money for use in Drug Policy. The Colonial Foundation funds the project. Alison Ritter will be asked to speak at a future meeting.
- Bill Bush attended the ACTCOSS Conference: This conference is held every two years. A dominant issue at the conference was housing particularly the increasing number of people with mental illness attempting to access public housing and the reduced funding.
- Family Drug Support ‘Mulgoa’ Weekend: Bill Bush and Cynthia Groundwater attended. Guest Presenters informed attendees about some mental health issues and gave up to date information on methamphetamines, including ‘ice’.
- ACTCOSS Prison Forum Bill, Marion, Brian and John attended the forum. It was run mainly for service-providing organizations, most of whom expressed pessimism about the prospects of the prison succeeding in its objectives.

Published opinion pieces

- Prison of political correctness still distorting drug use by Bill Bush in the Canberra Times on 9 November 2005
- Cracking down on cannabis: mental health: new battlefield - abstinence or harm minimisation? by Bill Bush in The Age on 13 Feb. 2006
- Kids at risk: why we are failing by Bill Bush in the Canberra Times in Sept. 2006

FFDLR Awareness raising activities

- Nov 05: Bill bush spoke at a forum at the ACT Assembly organised by CAHMA on "How to talk about a prion NSP in polite society and not be shunned".
- March: Andrew Macintosh, Deputy Director Australia institute spoke at a public meeting at the ACT Legislative Assembly about Methamphetamines, Mental Health and Drug Law Reform. The meeting was sponsored by Mary Porter, MLA and was well attended.
- May: Bill Bush spoke to a meeting of the Independent Scholars Association on "Scholarship in a stormy sea: survival in the passion and politics of drug policy
- May: Brian McConnell spoke at the Wesley uniting Church – Can drug law reform make things better?
- June: Drug Action Week: Father Peter Norden spoke at a public meeting at the ACT Legislative Assembly about Prisons, Drugs and Mental Illness: must they always go together? The meeting was sponsored by Mary Porter and about 100 people attended.
- November 2006: Presentation on harm reduction versus tough on drugs at an ACT high school.

Talks at FFDLR meetings

- April: Bill Bush spoke to our meeting about the new A.C.T. Prison, about the most recent meeting of the ACT Crime Prevention Committee at which John Paget, Head of the Prisons Project, gave a presentation.
- May: Victor Martin, Deputy Public Advocate, spoke about ‘Advocating for people with impaired decision making ability – do drugs play a part?’
- July: Bruce & Prashant Munro reported on the International Conference on the Reduction of Drug Related Harm held in April and about the contact he had made with a Canadian activist group “From Grief to Action”.

- August: Kevin Wenman, from the Insurance Policy Section of the A.C.T. Department of Treasury.

Remembrance Ceremony

The Eleventh Annual Remembrance Ceremony was held at Weston Park in the ACT on 16 October 2006. Speakers were Tony Trimmingham from Family Drug Support, Senator Lyn Allison and Bishop Pat Power. The Canberra Union Voices added significantly to the ceremony. Geoff Bagnall photographed the event. See our website for more information.

FFDLR also participated in discussion into the possibility of establishing a national remembrance day.

FFDLR media activities

The Writing Letters to the Editor brochure was revised and distributed with the February newsletter. A number of letters to the editor were written by members and published.

Media releases were issued as follows:

- Young and mentally ill endangered by Howard's cannabis scare issued in Feb. 2006
- Drug Policy: A plea to put health and well being first.
- Public Meeting on Methamphetamines, Mental Health and Drug Law Reform
- Drug Action Week: Invitation to hear Father Peter Norden speak on Prisons, Drugs and Mental Illness: must they always go together?
- 11th Annual Remembrance Ceremony 'for those who lose their lives to illicit drugs'

FFDLR has received good support from WIN TV and the Canberra Times for which we are always grateful. Where once we had good support from ABC TV and radio, it is no longer the case. Vice President, John Ley has undertaken to inquire into the matter.

Other awareness raising activities

An important vehicle for raising awareness has been the regular production of the FFDLR Newsletter. Ten issues were produced and mailed to members. In addition a complimentary copy of the Newsletter was emailed to all Australian members of parliaments.

The FFDLR website is an important source of information and a shop front for FFDLR.

Brian McConnell,
President