

President's Annual Report 2008

(Presented at the November AGM)

Introduction

This thirteenth President's report covers the 12 month period from November 2007 to November 2008.

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; Bob McFadden, treasurer; and Cynthia Groundwater, secretary and Joan Westaway who has ably filled in for Cynthia when Cynthia was away. I also thank Marion McConnell for her organising work and support, and St Ninian's Church for the use of its hall.

Bill Bush adds a very important dimension to our work through his professionally and compassionately written submissions. We, as members of FFDLR, have every reason to be proud of the high quality of our submissions that are submitted to Parliamentary and other inquiries. Most of this is due to the valuable work that Bill puts into that task and I thank him very much. However it is more than just submissions – the new FFDLR brochures are also Bill's and his son's work.

Events of significance

Internationally there are signs of a change in thinking on the issue of illicit drugs. The United Nations, once a strong defender of the law enforcement/zero tolerance solution has shown that it is prepared to change. It has moved from the futile statement of its undersecretary, Pino Arlacchi, who claimed the world could be drug free by 2008 to a position of recognition of the reality. In a joint statement between UNODC, WHO and UNAIDS it has thrown its full weight behind needle and syringe programs and opioid substitution therapy.

However objectivity and reality is not universal and UK Prime Minister Brown, against advice, rescheduled cannabis on the same par as heroin. Such populist actions mean we will remain in the dark ages of drug policy for some time yet.

In Australia the welcome attention to alcohol has unfortunately deprived illicit drug policy of the attention that it deserves. Even so, the change of government signalled the end of the Howard zero tolerance rhetoric and the ALP has indicated its full support for harm minimisation and relevant ministers since the election have reiterated that commitment. To date, though, there has been little to indicate an official willingness to address the contradictions between the three arms of the national harm minimisation policy of supply reduction, harm reduction and demand reduction. Measures in pursuit of any one of these arms needs to be co-ordinated to ensure, on the basis of the best available evidence, that such measures do not undermine the other arms, something that law enforcement so often does.

At a state level, facilities like the supervised injecting room in Sydney could be under threat of closing – not so much from the current government but from the possibility of a change of government with a different philosophy toward that facility. Maintenance treatments for addiction and needle and syringe programs are always in constant threat of funding or resource cutbacks, notwithstanding that these services already continue to be under funded and under resourced.

The media generally continues dramatically to report seizures as the "biggest" drug bust ever. However, much of this is promoted by law enforcement agencies and the worrying aspect is that there is little regard for whether or not such big events actually make a difference on the street. For example, the Australian Federal Police uses seizures as the basis of its drug harms index in its bid for ever more resources. In fact the high level of seizures simply shows that there are more drugs around. Market indicators of reported plentiful supply, stable or declining prices and stable or rising purity are sure indicators that supply reduction efforts are failing to stem illicit drug supply. But this fact is rarely reported, rather the sensational story is published without the balance.

In August the *International Journal of Drug Policy* included a series of articles that supported what Families and Friends have been saying since 2001 that the heroin drought was not brought about by Australian law enforcement efforts. The articles demolish arguments underpinning the officially commissioned study that told the then Federal Government what it wanted to hear.

One of the disappointing spin offs of the back seat placement of illicit drug policy by the new Federal Government is the failure to recognise the implications of drug policy for many if not all the most intractable and costly social problems that the government is giving attention to: problems like mental health, homelessness and child protection. In respect of mental health, co-morbidity with substance abuse and other mental health problems are expectations rather than the exception. This comorbidity characterises the homeless population and those in prisons. Increasingly desperate governments around the country refuse to acknowledge what other studies show - that measures dictated by drug policy do as much if not more to undermine the capacity of drug affected parents than the drugs themselves. FFDLR has given enthusiastic support to the proposal to have the Productivity Commission consider the financial implications of drug policy. The Collins & Lapsley studies show that States and Territories incur the lions share of expenses arising from illicit drugs even though illicit drug policy is principally determined at the federal level.

In the ACT our focus has been on the new prison especially in relation to NSPs and strip searching. At time of writing the prison was almost complete with preparations for the transfer of prisoners back from NSW to commence in February – somewhat later than expected. I have been nominated to represent the ACT Coalition on Corrections on a community monitoring and evaluation group of the prison. Only a few meetings of that group have been held.

A great deal of work in respect of the Coalition has been undertaken by members of FFDLR and a significant number of public forums promoting good prison practices have been held. However while the government has promoted the prison as human rights

compliant, there seems to be a limit to that claim. In the last days of the majority ALP government an amendment to the Corrections Management Act was pushed through with no community consultation. It allowed for the routine strip-searching of prisoners – a practice contrary to human rights expectations.

The ACT elections brought an end to the majority ALP government and provides a balance in the Legislative Assembly with 7 ALP members, 6 Liberal members and 4 Green members. The ALP has formed government with a signed agreement with the Greens. Members of FFDLR were saddened that Greens member Deb Foskey did not stand again at the election but we are most grateful for all her efforts in supporting our issue.

In the New Year the ACT is expected to launch a new alcohol and drug strategy, while it will have emphasis on alcohol and tobacco – because those drugs cause the greatest problems – it will nevertheless incorporate good strategies for illicit drugs. And like the 2004 - 2008 strategy just finished, its implementation and evaluation will be monitored by a joint government and community committee. Annual evaluation reports of the 2004 – 2008 strategy can be found on the department of Health's website at:
<http://health.act.gov.au/c/health?a=da&did=10133064&pid=1156381026>

Involvement in the community or other organisations

FFDLR is represented as follows:

The Opiate Program – ACT: John Ley has been our representative on this committee. Despite John's best efforts this program has all but been abandoned by the body responsible for the program's operation – the ACT Division of General Practice. ACT Health is considering possible options to this program.

Community Corrections on Coalition: Bill Bush, Brian McConnell, John Ley are FFDLR's representatives on this community coalition. For much of the year Bill has been secretary to the coalition and has worked tirelessly for it. John is currently chair of the coalition. The work of the group is important and aims to ensure that the new ACT prison meets appropriate standards. We contributed to the preparation of the coalition's study, *Healthy or harmful? Mental health and the operational regime of the new ACT prison* that Professor Ian Webster launched in April 2008 (<http://correctionscoalitionact.org.au>).

ACT Alcohol and Other Drugs Strategy Implementation & Evaluation Committee: Brian McConnell continued his representation on this group. The committee is currently considering the next 5 years' drug strategy. The strategy is expected to be released for public discussion shortly.

DIRECTIONS ACT: Brian McConnell is a member of the Board of this drug user support and education service agency. That organisation is gaining in respect for the work it undertakes.

Drug Action Week Planning Group: Marion and Bill attended meetings of this group that was chaired by the Youth Coalition.

Representations

FFDLR members met with and made representations to the following:

- ACT Health Minister, Katie Gallagher, in respect of the methadone clinic.
- Julia Irwin, Mal Washer, Bob McMullan, Gary Humphries, Annett Ellis, Gino Vumbacca (CEO of ANCD) a number of NGO bodies and many others in respect of a proposal for referral of illicit drugs to the Productivity Commission. That project is ongoing.
- **2020 Summit:** This Summit, called by the Prime Minister was held in Canberra on the weekend 19-20 April. FFDLR nominated Alison Ritter and Margaret Hamilton as attendees. Those nominations were accepted.
- Dr Kristine Klugman and Mr Bill Rowlings of Civil Liberties Australia on 12 September 2008

Submissions

FFDLR made the following written submissions during the year:

- Inquiry into the early intervention and care of vulnerable infants in the ACT by the standing committee on health and disability of the Legislative Assembly for the ACT. Joan Westaway, Bill Bush and John Ley appeared before this committee
- An Open Letter to the Prime Minister seeking evidence-based drug policies dated 6 March: Brian has had several positive responses to the open letter addressed to the Prime Minister concerning the consequences of our drug laws and possible ways forward. A response from the Department of Health was received on 24 April.
- In February 2008 FFDLR published, with a preface, its submission made in March the previous year to the Inquiry of The House of Representatives Standing Committee On Family And Human Services Into The Impact of Illicit Drug Use On Families.
- Legislative Assembly Standing Committee on health and disability inquiry into the use of crystal methamphetamine. John Ley and Bill Bush also presented orally to this committee.
- A submission to the Australia 2020 Summit.

- Legislative Assembly on Drugs and Driving discussion paper.

Conferences, Seminars and Inquiries Attended

Brian & Bill Bush attended a Comorbidity Care Forum on 6 December 2007. It was organised by ADFACT.

Bill Bush attended a Healthpact Research Centre annual seminar on 7 December 2007 at which Prof. Michael Levy spoke on health promotion and prisons.

Brian, Marion, and Bill attended a Community forum on 10 December 2007 organised by the ACT Human Rights Commission that considered a needle-syringe exchange for the new ACT prison.

Brian, Marion & Bill Bush attended a seminar of the Community Inclusion Board on inclusive practices: ACT prisoners and their families on 22 April 2008. Attended by

Brian attended the first meeting of the Corrections Reference Group that was chaired by Simon Corbell, Minister for Justice and Community Safety (JACS).

ADLRF and Parliamentary Group for DLR: Brian and Marion met with some members of the Parliamentary Group for Drug Law Reform to discuss its future directions.

Meeting of Parliamentary Group for DLR: Some members of FFDLR attended this meeting which was held in Parliament House on 25th June. Alex Wodak was the speaker. The number of politicians attending was disappointing.

Drug Action Week Conference at the National Library on 25 June. Bill attended.

- ACT Corrections seminar on through-care on 14 July. Attended by John Ley & Bill Bush.
- ACTCOSS Conference, “Community Sectors Futures”, on 4 & 5 September 2008. Marion, Bill, Victor Stevens, Colin Hales and John Ley Attended.
- ACT Women and Prison’s group and Community Coalition on Corrections Forum on strip searching: Marion McConnell, Victor Stevens, and John Ley attended this forum on 30th September, which was about strip searching in the ACT prison.

Published opinion pieces

- “Jail no drugs or no rights” by Bill Bush was published in the Canberra Times on 27 Aug 2008.

FFDLR Awareness raising activities

- FFDLR had a stall during Canberra Connect’s Multicultural Week in mid February.
- One thousand of each of two revised brochures were printed. Most were distributed in conjunction with the Family Drug Support newsletter. We were pleased that some new membership resulted from the mailout.
- FFDLR members met with Alison Ritter of the Drug Policy Modelling Project following her attendance at the 2020 Summit.

Public Forums

- FFDLR members attended a public launch of a paper “Healthy or Harmful? - Mental health and the operational regime of the ACT prison” by the ACT Community Coalition on Corrections. It was launched by Prof. Ian Webster at the Legislative Assembly on 16 April 2008. The Mental Health Coalition and Consumer Network were the sponsoring Corrections Coalition members.
- **Drug Action Week:** A forum “Can NSPs be an OH&S risk in the AMC? - Syringes and Work Safety in the new ACT prison” was held on Tuesday 24 June at the Legislative Assembly. Deb Foskey sponsored the forum and John Ryan, CEO of Anex in Melbourne, was the speaker.

Monthly meetings

Meetings were held every month from February to November. Many important and topical issues were discussed and action taken where appropriate.

Remembrance Ceremony

The Remembrance Ceremony was held on Monday 20th October at Weston Park. The speakers were the Hon Senator Jan McLucas, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Health and Ageing, Melanie Benson, a family member and Rev’d John Brown from the Uniting Church. Carolyn Minchin provided the music and Directions staff, Stasia Dabrowski as well as FFDLR members assisted with the refreshments. About 90 people attended the ceremony.

Before the ceremony the Memorial Rock was moved because of the need to provide ground works around a nearby cedar tree that was in danger of dying because of the drought. We are grateful to the City Parks staff for moving the memorial rock.

Despite our best efforts it has not been possible to convince the Victorian Salvation Army to change their “Overdose Day” which incorporate a remembrance ceremony from 31 August to coincide with our date.

Talks and presentations

- Bill and Brian spoke at a U3A Current Affairs class on drug laws, focusing on the international conventions.
- The Chairman of the ACT Parole Board (ACT Sentencing Board) spoke at Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform's April meeting

FFDLR media activities

Media releases were issued as follows:

- No new ideas in Coalition's dead end policy – 19 Nov 2007
- A sterile syringe program will promote workplace safety in the new ACT prison – 24 June 2008
- Drug law enforcement credibility in tatters: time for a royal commission (about the heroin drought causes) – 4 August 2008.
- After 13 years change is coming – 13th annual remembrance ceremony -19 October 2008

Other awareness raising activities

Questions to ACT Election Candidates: A series of questions were sent to all parties who stood candidates for the ACT election. The results were published in the September Newsletter.

Brian McConnell,
President