

President's Annual Report 2009

(Presented at the November AGM)

Introduction

This fourteenth President's report covers the 12 month period from November 2008 to November 2009.

My thanks go to those who contributed to the group's activities during the year by writing letters, 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.

Those who know Bill Bush were concerned to hear that he had suddenly taken seriously ill and spent some time in intensive care in the latter part of the year. We are all relieved to know that he is now home but has a time of recovery ahead of him. Bill contributes much more than his share to many areas of injustice in our society and we are most indebted to him for his professional work for FFDLR which is always undertaken in a considered and compassionate manner.

Events of significance

There is growing research and evidence that shows alternate approaches to drug issues can be more effective than strict prohibition. The shining examples are heroin prescription programs which continue to show good results and are being adopted by more countries – the most recent being passage in the German Bundesrat of laws permitting it, decriminalisation of possession of small quantities of illicit drugs by some countries, and significantly, removal of opposition to NSP funding and medical marijuana by the US federal government.

The number of significant people speaking out against the strict prohibition approach is increasing and there is an expectation that the latest report by TRANSFORM will contribute

to encouraging the debate and giving courage to even more to speak out.

Internationally there are signs of change in thinking on the issue of illicit drugs. The United Nations drug agencies, once a strong defender of the law enforcement/zero tolerance/drug free world 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.

A joint statement between UNODC, WHO and UNAIDS has thrown its full weight behind needle and syringe programs and opioid substitution therapy. In fact the UNODC now talks about "containment", but it is doubtful that even that can be achieved.

There is still a great deal to be done in respect of the treaties and the UN. But the major stumbling block is the alliance of Sweden, USA, Japan, many ex-soviet states and most Arab nations. It is this alliance that strongly opposes any sensible changes to the treaties. Many countries are finding ways around the treaties. Examples are: decriminalisation of possession of small quantities of drugs, Dutch coffee shops, medical applications such as prescription heroin, or scientific trials such as supervised injecting centres. These may be small in the scheme of things but they do signify a breakdown of the harsh regime imposed by the treaties.

There is movement in the UK that is noticeable in various media reports and articles from that country that there needs to be change away from the strict regime of prohibition. The recent TRANSFORM report, "After the War on Drugs: Blueprint for Regulation" is one example of a respected think tank taking the initiative to give feasible models on regulation of drugs. Although the UK increased the cannabis classification and PM Gordon Brown sacked his chief drug advisor for speaking the truth, contradicting the PM's spin, the strong objections in media reports and articles shows an acute and healthy awareness of the issues by the UK people.

LEAP (Law Enforcement Against Prohibition) in the United States is increasing in popularity. The Australian Drug Law Reform Foundation sponsored an Australian tour by Norm Stamper who is a former head of the Seattle Police Department and advisor to LEAP.

He visited Australia in October and toured most Australian capital cities, speaking publicly and talking privately to members of parliament and law enforcement and other officials. He argued that the “war on drugs” has failed and costs thousands of lives and billions of dollars and that money wasted in the USA on federal, state and local police, courts, prosecutors, prisons, probation, parole and other punishment-related programs could be better spent on improving health and social interventions to ameliorate drug problems. Could this also be so for Australia?

This was an opportunity to open the debate and to encourage a more effective approach to the problems created by drugs and our response to drugs.

Both Portugal and Mexico have decriminalised the possession and use of small quantities of illicit drugs. Portugal decriminalised in 2002 and during this year a report was published on the effects of that action. Contrary to some expectations use of the drugs reduced and there were savings of police resources that were able to be applied to increased health services.

In Australia the continuing attention to alcohol has unfortunately continued to deprive our topic of oxygen.

Despite the ALP’s indication of full support for harm minimisation there has been few indications that the tough (for government) issue of illicit drugs is to be tackled soon.

There continues to be a general lack of interest by members of federal parliament. At a recent meeting of the Australian Parliamentary Group for Drug Law Reform only a staunch few members of parliament attended (I counted only five current members). Although some others took the time to proffer an apology, their attendance would not have swollen the numbers greatly.

The disproportionate allocation of funds to the criminal justice system continues to be an issue – particularly when there is no objective justification for it. The large number of arrests of users is also a significant issue with over 80 percent of drug arrests being users. Despite

enquiries no satisfactory answer has yet been forthcoming. One answer from the federal minister, Brendan O’Connor, who is responsible for Parliamentary oversight of the Australian Crime Commission, the body that publishes the statistics, in recent communication clearly was not interested in the voracity of the statistics nor what they may mean in respect of efficient use of law enforcement resources.

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. However a recent report confirmed once again the great benefits of the needle and syringe program. The media generally continues to dramatically 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 to whether or not such big events actually make a difference on the street. 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 is rarely reported, rather the sensational story is published without the balance.

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 had in 2008 given enthusiastic support to the proposal to have the Productivity Commission consider the financial implications of drug policy. Attempts to raise this issue in a debate in parliament were not successful. Referral of the matter to the Productivity Commission is an issue that needs to be taken up again in 2010.

However with the growing number of countries moving away from strict prohibition it is up to organisations like ours to keep the pressure on our governments to look at the options and bring on the debate.

In the ACT we continue to monitor the new prison especially in relation to NSPs. The prison is now operational and some data is being gathered to evaluate the need for an NSP in the prison.

A report in the Canberra Times indicated that there were drugs in the prison at a very early stage of its occupation. The rate of HepC infection in the prison is about 65 percent. And the occupancy rate appears to be rising.

I continue to represent the ACT Coalition on Corrections on a prison community monitoring and evaluation group. Until recently only one meeting had been held in 2009. With the resignation of Mr Hargreaves as Corrections Minister and his replacement by Mr Corbell the meetings have now resumed.

Involvement in the community or other organisations

FFDLR is represented as follows:

Community Corrections on Coalition: Bill Bush, Brian McConnell, John Ley are FFDLR's representatives on this community coalition. The work of the group is important and aims to ensure that the new ACT prison meets appropriate standards.

ACT Alcohol and Other Drugs Strategy Implementation & Evaluation Committee: Brian McConnell continued his representation on this group. The committee completed the next 5 years' drug strategy. The strategy is awaiting release 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: Bill attended meetings of this group that was chaired by the Youth Coalition.

ACTCOSS: Marion was a member of the General Committee of ACTCOSS during 2009.

Family Drug Support: FFDLR continues to strongly support FDS an organisation that helps families and loved ones dealing with drug use in the family. Many members are volunteers on the telephone support line. For those volunteers it is also a means of remaining grounded in the issues that are affecting families.

Representations

FFDLR members met with and made representations to the following:

Meetings with:

Shane Rattenbury, MLA, ACT Greens

Jeremy Hanson, MLA, ACT Liberals

Joy Burch, MLA, ACT ALP

Rev'd Rex Graham, Social justice

Consultant, Uniting Care NSW/ACT

Rev'd Graham Long, Pastor Wayside Chapel

Brendan Kennedy & Rev'd Ivan Roberts, City Uniting Church ACT

Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform was invited to participate in Queensland University of Technology Project – Internet D&A Services. Phyll Dance and Brian McConnell represented Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform.

Two Day workshop about Strategic Directions and Governance: This workshop involved Managers of Drug and Alcohol Programs looking at the implementation of the Siggins Miller Report. A representative from FFDLR was invited to speak. Bill Bush agreed to be the speaker on behalf of FFDLR.

Conferences, Seminars Attended

Drug Policy Modelling Program Research Symposium: This symposium was held in Surrey Hills in Sydney on 13th October. Alison Ritter the Director of Research and a number of researchers working on that project spoke of the program's research. Brian and Marion McConnell represented FFDLR at the symposium.

Drug Action Week. Even though FFDLR did not organise an event this year many of our

members attended events and seminars organised by others. One of these was the “Prison Health is Public Health – Hepatitis C, prisoners and our community”. Michael Moore, CEO of the Public Health Association was the guest speaker and his address was well accepted by the many who attended. Some of us also attended both the National and local launch where Ian Webster and Katy Gallagher respectively were the speakers.

Published opinion pieces

Europeans lead shift in international focus on drugs Policy.

Governments are reassessing how to tackle the mainstream problem of illicit narcotics, Bill Bush wrote in The Canberra Times, Monday 9 March 2009.

Drug policy needs a deeper focus to halt snowballing risks.

Urgent change is crucial to stop increasing budget wastage and greater harm in society, Bill Bush wrote in The Canberra Times, Friday 15 May, 2009.

Letters – a number of letters were sent to newspapers by members of FFDLR.

FFDLR Awareness raising activities

FFDLR had a stall during Canberra Connect’s Multicultural Week in mid February. The new banner designed by Bill Bush and his son Thomas was used at the stall for the first time. The FFDLR website was revised and updated during the year. This included a facility for joining FFDLR via the website and with payments being made by direct deposit. The monthly Newsletter provides a means to keep in touch with members. Some members have asked for their Newsletter to be emailed which can mean faster delivery for the member and a saving of postage to FFDLR. The Newsletter is also forwarded to all members of parliament.

Media: Several media releases were issued during the year and some interviews with media were conducted.

Public forums

Illicit drugs policy through the lens of regulation, Thursday 23 April 2009

Speaker: Alison Ritter

The inhumane and unjust War against Drugs, Monday 26th October

Speaker: Norm Stamper, former head of the Seattle Police Department

Monthly meetings

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

Guest speakers at monthly meetings

Measuring the Extent and Proceeds of the Global Illicit Drugs Trades, Thursday 26 March 2009

Speaker: Assoc Prof John Walker, CEO, Crime Trends Analysis; Principal Research, Fellow, Centre for Transnational Crime Prevention, University of Wollongong

The present structure and operation of the ACT Alcohol and Drug Program and how future changes will impact on it, Thursday 27th August 2009

Speaker: Vera van de Velde from the ACT Alcohol and Drugs Program.

Remembrance Ceremony

The Remembrance Ceremony was held on Monday 19th October at Weston Park. The speakers were Debra Wybron, the ACT Deputy Chief Minister and Minister for Health, and Rev’d Graham Long from the Kings Cross Wayside Chapel.

Carolyn Minchin and partner Geoff Bagnell provided the music and Directions staff, Stasia Dabrowski as well as FFDLR members assisted with the refreshments. Over 100 people attended the ceremony.

Brian McConnell,
President