

Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform (ACT) Inc

2012 Annual President's report

First I must thank my executive committee, vice president John Ley, treasurer Bob McFadden, secretary and registrar Cynthia Groundwater and my other committee members and especially Bill Bush and most importantly Marion who keeps me on the straight and narrow.

It is appropriate in this annual report to make a special mention of a long standing and strong supporter and contributor to drug law reform issues and that is Peter Watney who died in August this year at the age 90 years. Peter's life is a reminder that no matter what the age one can always make a contribution. But it is a reminder also that we need young people to join in with our cause. Peter was a member of FFDLR since its inception in 1995.

This year we have undertaken the usual tasks such as publishing a monthly newsletter, holding monthly meetings, attending relevant forums, meeting members of parliament and other community leaders, writing letters to the editor and making a contribution whenever appropriate. In this latter respect we met with Chris Bourke, Simon Corbell, Amanda Bresnan, Shane Rattenbury, Jeremy Hanson, all members of the ACT legislative Assembly and Dr Mal Washer, member of the House of Representatives, in addition to chance encounters with Katy Gallagher, ACT Chief Minister, John Stanhope, former ACT Chief Minister, and Mary Porter, member of the ACT Legislative Assembly. We also had a very fruitful discussion with the ACT Chief Police Officer, Roman Quaedvlieg who understood the issues we raised with him concerning drug dependency being treated as a health issue.

Michael Haines, ACT Health Opioid Treatment Service and Alcohol and Drug Policy Unit was the speaker at our first meeting for the year. He spoke about designer drugs especially those that are ordered over the internet. It was easy to see from his talk that the traditional approaches to control of these types of drugs will not work. At the October meeting Dr Graham Buriski shared with us the insights he had gained on illicit drug use over some years.

The FFDLR Petition calling for an evidence based debate on drug laws and policies which was presented to Amanda Bresnan, Greens MLA in November 2011 was responded to by the government on 20 March 2012 by tabling a statement and having it included in Hansard. The government's response was very unsatisfactory. A follow up meeting with Simon Corbell (MLA) did not produce the results we would have wanted.

As a consequence of the ACT Government's disappointing response to our petition Bill Bush on behalf of FFDLR produced and released during Drug Action Week, a publication called "Breaking the Taboo - Lets start a conversation on drug policy". The booklet gives examples of a range of negative effects of existing drug policies on virtually all portfolios. It illustrates the truism that drugs are implicated in all the Territory's most intractable problems. Adjustment of drug policy holds out the hope of quick, lasting improvement in these domains and large savings in public expenditure to boot.

FFDLR's contribution to Drug Action Week was a forum held on 21 June with Nicholas Cowdery, AM QC speaking on the topic - "Living with drugs: fostering a safe, open and rational society" This was successfully organised by Bill Bush and Joan Westaway. The conference run by ATODA during Drug Action Week deserves special mention. On 15 August at a Justice Health Conference organised by the Public Health Association, the Chief Minister Katy Gallagher announced the Government's decision to introduce a needle exchange in the prison.

I should mention also that we have a close relationship with ATODA and it has been most helpful during 2012.

FFDLR's relationship with Directions and the Department of Health through the ACT Alcohol, Tobacco and Other Drug Strategy Evaluation Group has been a fruitful one. I am a member of

Direction's Board and also on the ATOD Strategy Evaluation Group. Many FFDLR members have influence through other organisations such as political parties, church organisations, social justice groups, community groups and the like.

Some may have thought that because we were absent overseas during Drug Action Week we were having a break from drug law reform issues. However during our time away we made contact with two similar groups to FFDLR in Vienna and in Wuppertal in Germany. It was fortuitous that whilst in Vienna we were able to attend their annual Remembrance Ceremony for people who had lost their lives to drugs. Their memorial is directly in front of the United Nations building in Vienna. In Berlin we had contact with a young man who was promoting the legalisation of cannabis. The former contacts will prove useful for the launch of our Global Family Declaration.

We experimented with our own election material during the Legislative Assembly Elections but for various reasons was not the success that we hoped it would be. The posters on stakes were broken or disappeared, and even though our leaflets had some coverage, thanks to the work by a few members, they did not get the coverage for which we had hoped. We did have one media contact relating to the leaflets but we were away from Canberra at the time and it was too late on our return.

The Remembrance Ceremony was held a couple of weeks earlier this year so that we could have Mal Washer as one of the speakers. We were apprehensive in that we thought attendance might be down, because the day chosen was a public holiday. Our numbers seemed to be about the same irrespective of the public holiday. It would seem that those who found it difficult to attend on a working day were able to come on this holiday. The contribution of the items chosen by The Strange Weather Choir were much appreciated. The speakers, Mal Washer, Elaine Bridge and Rev'd Ivan Roberts made appropriate contributions for the occasion and their words resonated well with those in attendance. Thanks also of course to Directions for helping out with tea and coffee and for doing so on a public holiday. I thank all those organisations who helped with publicity even though they were not able to attend. The help of other organisations is always greatly appreciated.

This was a year of hope with more people and organisations throughout the world realising the failure of drug prohibition and calling for policies that caused less harm to individuals and society. Here in Australia the most significant contribution was the two roundtables undertaken by Australia21. Australia21 is an independent, non-profit organisation whose core purpose is multidisciplinary research and inquiry on issues of strategic importance to Australia in the 21st century. The roundtables culminated in two significant reports, making a clear statement that the prohibition drug laws have failed and that we need to have a discussion or debate based on the evidence in a search for better drug policies. Various polls and online forums supported the recommendations of the reports but unfortunately most members of parliament were silent on the issue. Nevertheless Australia21 will push on and plans are underway to conduct a national drug summit in 2013.

A project, which has been undertaken by FFDLR is the Global Family Declaration. This is a declaration for families, family members and their friends throughout the world to sign on-line. A database of email addresses of organisations similar to FFDLR has been compiled and the assistance of those organisations and perhaps others such as Getup!, AVAAZ, the Beckley Foundation will be sought in order to gain as many signatures as possible. When sufficient signatures have been received the declaration will be presented to governments and to the Secretary General of the United Nations.

Thank you all again for your help, your involvement or just simply being a member during the year.

Brian McConnell

President

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