

President's Report 2013

Introduction

The year of 2013 has seen much discussion on drug law reform issues and the failure of prohibition. This has occurred in the USA, some European countries, South America and even New Zealand. In these countries changes in laws and policies are slowly happening but the issue has not received much coverage here in Australia and certainly with no changes in laws or policies. It is disappointing that politicians, the media and organisations are not seeing drug law reform as a priority as far as reducing harm and costs are concerned. In 2012, due to the efforts of Australia21 there was a lot of media on the issue and influential people spoke out about the failure of prohibition but unfortunately this has not resulted in action that has carried over to 2013.

In April 2015 it will be the 20th anniversary of Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform and 2014 could be spent preparing a 20 year report on the organisation and preparing for a special event to mark the occasion.

World events

On the world stage events are moving slowly country by country or state by state toward acceptance of a need for drug law reform and in fact practical changes in that direction are being advanced.

Our nearby neighbour, New Zealand, has passed legislation regulating the marketing of psychoactive substances by a "Psychoactive Substances Regulatory Authority".

In the US voters in Colorado and Washington approved measures to legalise non-medical use of cannabis. The first US states to do so. Although it is illegal federally some 20 states have passed laws to some degree allowing the use of cannabis.

Uruguay has taken steps to bring the cannabis market under state control by undercutting and outlawing the traffickers. The government will arrange for a high-quality, legal product to be sold in a safe environment at a price that competes with that offered by illegal dealers. This is an action worth watching over the next few years

US law enforcement has succeeded in closing down the Silk Road, a website where drugs were purchased and mailed to customers, but reports are that it is business as usual via alternative websites.

Australian Events

In Australia the news is not so good. Here we appear to be marking time or perhaps even moving backward. Overdose deaths appear to be on the rise with the latest report for 2008 indicating some 500 opioid deaths, not all of which are from street heroin, but from prescription opioids as well. Law enforcement still has its tight control on drug policies. It takes 66 percent of the budget and jails are becoming more overcrowded.

Unlike the sensible approach by New Zealand, rather than regulate them NSW has outlawed synthetic drugs

The NSW Parliamentary Committee Report on Drug Treatment said they were satisfied with present treatments but saw the need for a trial of naltrexone implants.

NSW government also received a report from a cross-party committee recommending the use of medical marijuana for the terminally ill and people with AIDS. The Government rejected the recommendation, saying there is limited evidence about the efficiency of cannabis for medical purposes and it does not support the use of unregulated cannabis products.

We note also the intolerance and lack of understanding of Pru Goward, Member for Goulburn and Minister for Family and Community. She would, if allowed, remove the children of all those using drugs. Have we not yet learned the lessons of the stolen generation? Wouldn't it be better and more forward thinking policy to support families, 24 hours a day if necessary, pre and post natal?

In the ACT some small easing of limits of the possession of cannabis for personal use for the purpose of the SCON system is being considered. FFDLR has provided comment on this proposal. But in SA those similar limits are being tightened.

Australian Drug Law Reform AGM was held in Sydney on 23/10/2013: Bill Bush attended and reported that Alex Wodak, President of ADLRF intended organising Youth Summits throughout the country commencing in 2013 and running through 2014.

A significant article by former Senator Gary Humphries appeared in ADCA News. He lamented the decision not to go ahead with the heroin trial back in 1997.

The Australian National Council on Drugs, the principal advisory body to Government, has produced some well researched position papers and research papers as well as a very informative magazine 'Of Substance'. It would appear that governments take little notice of this research.

The one shining light has been the Greens Senator, Richard Di Natale who has spoken out about the need for changes to the drug policies and is interested in securing bi-partisan support for a drug summit.

Drug Law Reform Party

The Drug Law Reform Party was launched prior to the 2013 election. Marion attended and spoke at the launch. Her talk is on YouTube. Senate candidates stood for the states of Vic, SA NSW and the ACT. Greg Chipp, the founder of the party stood in Victoria, Tony Trimmingham stood in NSW and Paul Cubitt stood in the ACT. FFDLR assisted with the ACT campaign. Greg Chipp used Facebook to promote the party but there was very little interest from other media. No candidate was successful on this occasion but it is interesting to note that the ACT received the highest percentage of votes

'Get Up' organised a Senate Candidates Election Forum in August. Paul; Cubitt was invited and participated as part of the panel. FFDLR responded to the 'Getup' invitation to propose a question to the candidates. Unfortunately the question was not asked. Other similar forums did not invite candidates from the minor parties.

FFDLR Activities

Drug Action Week

FFDLR organised a public forum during Drug Action Week entitled "How many cones, How many pills? How many lines of coke?" - estimating the size of Australia's market in illegal drugs and its potential for raising revenue under a regulated market. The presenter and author of the paper was Dr John Jiggins. The forum was ably chaired by Jack Waterford, Editor-at-Large at the Canberra Times. Jack Waterford wrote a complementary opinion piece in the Canberra Times following the event.

ATODA organised a forum in July as part of Drug Action Week. The speaker was Prof Beau Kilmer of the Rand Corporation Forum. The purpose of the forum was to explore the criminological theory and evidence base for sanctions that are swift, certain but not severe. Particular focus will be given to its application to drink driving offences including discussing the evaluation findings from the USA South Dakota 24/7 Program.

During Drug Action Week, Brian spoke at ATODA's annual conference on FFDLR's experience with internet technology as a way of promoting its message.

Membership of Other Organisations

Brian is a member of the Directions Board and a member of the ACT Alcohol Tobacco and Other Drug Strategy Evaluation Group.

Marion is a member of the ADCA Families and Community Working Group.

Colin is closely connected with a number of mental health committees and attended a Mental Health Society Conference in Sydney, where there was a launch of its charter by the Federal Minister, Mark Butler. The Mental Health Society was established to link Mental Health People.

Meetings

Brian, Marion and Bill met with Richard Di Natale's adviser on 29 November 2012. Unfortunately Di Natale had been called to the Senate chamber and was unable to meet with them personally. However the meeting was a fruitful one. A further meeting with Richard is planned.

Because of Easter the March meeting did not have a quorum and the April Meeting was cancelled due to it falling on Anzac Day.

Attendance at Public Meetings

Attending conferences has become very expensive which eliminates our ability to attend as many as we would like.

Prof. Mark Kleiman, Professor of Public Policy at UCLA (US) presented at a forum at Parliament House. Andrew Leigh hosted the forum entitled "When Brute Force Fails: How to have Less Crime and Less Punishment". Brian and Marion attended.

Bill Bush attended and presented at the Nimbin Mardi Grass conference. The conference was covered by media including the ABC programme 'Life Matters'.

Brian and Marion attended a public forum in Sydney in April: "New ideas to tackle drug and alcohol problems. The forum was held in the Sydney University School of Nursing.

The Late Peter Watney

Brian and Marion attended the Annual ACT ATODA Awards where the late Peter Watney was inducted into the honour roll.

A Peter Watney Memorial Scholarship has been agreed to by FFDLR. We are still awaiting a volunteer FFDLR member to take on this project.

Public Stalls

FFDLR had a stall at the Multicultural Festival. This was a very successful day. Thank you to those who helped on the stall.

Remembrance Ceremony

International remembrance

A meeting was held in Canberra between Tony Trimmingham from FDS and members of CAHMA and AIVL (the user group organisation) to discuss the question of matching the international date of 21 July with the remembrance ceremonies in Sydney and Canberra. Those at the meeting realised the importance of the spring date for the FFDLR Remembrance Ceremony. In the event Family Drug Support decided to change its date from one that coincided with FFDLR's to the international date.

FFDLR decided to retain its present date of October because the ACT event was an outdoor event linked to a particular tree and its blossoms and the memorial rock and because Canberra's climate in July was not conducive to an outdoor event.

It was decided that Canberra will acknowledge the 21st July International Remembrance Day date in other ways than with a remembrance ceremony and the ceremony will remain in October for the time being.

A planting of a tree in King's Cross in Sydney was held on 22nd July where remembrance ceremonies will take place in the future Tony Trimmingham chaired the event. Elaine Bridge represented FFDLR and spoke at the ceremony. Clover Moore, the Lord Mayor of Sydney spoke.

ACT Remembrance

The ACT Remembrance Ceremony 'for those who lose their life to illicit drugs' was held on Monday 21st October and about 100 people attended. Speakers were Susanne McGhie, Senator Richard Di Natale, and Rev. Erica Mathieson with The Strange Weather Choir providing the music. Although the event was at a different location because of a bicycle path construction, it was successful.

Speakers at FFDLR monthly meetings

Michael Moore, CEO Public Health Association of Australia and former Member of the ACT Legislative Assembly spoke at the February meeting on needle syringe programs in various overseas prisons including one in Iran.

Brent Beyer spoke on "The quest for answers: Australia and Us drug policies, observations, views and experiences while working in the community sector" at the May meeting.

Talks

Brian was invited to speak at the Amnesty International 'World day against the death penalty' on 10 October at the Union Court, ANU Campus. Brian's speech revolved around the connection of the War on Drugs and the death penalty especially as it related to the Bali 9.

Brian, Marion and Jude Byrne made a joint presentation at a U3A Current Affairs program on 3rd September. The title of the talk was "Drugs - the impact of prohibition, and the human side". Bill Bush had organised this talk.

Media

FFDLR issued a media release early in the year about recent amphetamine seizures in Australia. This would represent about a one month's supply in Sydney. Brian estimated that 6.8 tons of methamphetamine are used each year in Australia.

There have been a small number of media contacts this year, some wanting interviews and others seeking a contact.

Marion and Bill were interviewed on 2XX in May for a series on "An Ethical Life".

Several opinion pieces had been written and submitted during the year. Only one of these was published: "Drug laws not protecting our children" in the Brisbane Times.

A number of letters to the editor were sent to the Canberra Times and other papers. The Canberra Times published a reasonable number of those letters but attempts to have letters and opinion pieces published on the overcrowding of the Alexander Maconochie Centre were not successful.

Brian and Marion had recently been interviewed by a journalist student about drugs and their legal status. It might be a good idea to introduce FFDLR to universities and CITs volunteering our time to speak with students or interested groups. Making contact with younger groups could fare well into the future..

Twitter

Early in the year FFDLR joined Twitter. It is a good source of information. Since starting we have made 143 tweets, we are following 82 others and have 77 following us. Members can follow FFDLR on twitter at @FFDLR

Submissions

Bill prepared a most thorough and comprehensive submission to the Inquiry of the Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee into the Value of the Justice Reinvestment Approach to Criminal Justice in Australia stating in short that framing familiar issues in a new way like "justice reinvestment" is useful if it stimulates new ways of looking at familiar problems but we should not expect it to be the proverbial magic bullet. There are unlikely to be any short cuts to bypass the thorny political issues that have prevented progress in solving big social problems. Families and Friends asked that the committee approach with an open mind the difficult issues raised by its terms of reference and that it commit itself to seek out and apply the best available evidence in framing its recommendations. The report was published in June with recommendations being positive towards diverting funding towards Justice-Reinvestment but completely passed over the benefits that drug law reform would unlock through diversion of resources from drug law enforcement. It is interesting to note that there was a minority report by four senators of which Gary Humphries was one.

Brian wrote to the Chief Minister of the ACT Legislative Assembly in May about the progress of the NSP in the Alexander Macochie Centre. The Chief Minister, Katie Gallagher replied in June, advising that she was still supportive of the issue and was 'taking the time necessary to pursue options for this complex and sensitive initiative'.

The ADCA working group that Marion has been involved in has been successful in that ADCA adopted its position statement supporting families and communities affected by alcohol and other drug use and policies governing those drugs. The committee continues to work on subsidiary papers.

Preliminary work is underway on preparing a submission to the National Commission of Audit, pointing out the financial and social benefits that would flow from more innovative drug policies..

Matters of importance

Over the past few years it would be noticed that there has not been a recruitment of new members to make up for the natural decline in FFDLR membership. As a result our income from membership is down. Much of the decline is because members move or change email address without notification. But our membership is not growing and we seem not to be attracting new and or younger members despite a greater awareness in the community of the need for drug law reform. One could speculate why this is so.

Perhaps this is because we have not put effort into recruitment. But perhaps also because there is still stigma attached to illicit drugs and families are hesitant to join a group for fear of 'coming out'. This is something we will need to seriously consider in the coming months as it could impact on the continuation of the group.

It should be obvious also that our membership is aging. I myself reach my 70th birthday within the week.

If FFDLR is to continue then we need to have additional people taking on tasks and people able to fulfill executive positions.

For all the weariness of passing years, there is no doubt that the very existence of an organisation of Families and Friends calling for the reform of drug laws has moved discussion and debate, in the public's mind at least, if not most politicians. In the early days the mere words drug law reform were taboo. But not now. Polls and surveys confirm this. The majority will support some form of change of laws in respect of cannabis. The task is to translate that view into action.

In closing this report I would like to thank AIVL and CAHMA who helped with election material, Directions and ATODA who have helped with the Remembrance Ceremony. We have a good working relationship with these organisations and so too with the Department of Health's Alcohol and Other Drugs Policy Unit.

I thank also and especially the 2013 committee members for their support during the year. A special thank you to our treasurer, Bob McFadden and Secretary, Cynthia Groundwater. Bill Bush continues to be a fountain of information preparing submissions and helping with organisational matters. We welcomed Elaine Bridge, a resident in Sydney, to our committee this year and are most appreciative that she has been able to attend meetings here in Canberra.

To all those who attend meetings regularly, your attendance and support is most appreciated.

Brian McConnell, President

25/11/2013