

PRESIDENT'S REPORT 2014

Introduction

The year of 2014 has been a year of an increasing number of voices acknowledging the failure of our prohibition drug policies. The London School of Economics and Political Science, consisting of many World leaders reported in June that 'it is time to end the 'war on drugs' because what is being done is producing enormous negative outcomes'. Others who have joined the call during 2014 include the President of Columbia, Juan Manuel Santos; Kofi Annan, Former UN Secretary General; Eric Holder, Head, US Justice Department; Nick Clegg, Deputy Prime Minister of the UK, several law professor in Germany and most recently in Australia the NSW Bar Association Criminal Law Committee has released a Drug Policy Discussion Paper 'concluding that prohibition has been largely ineffective at preventing the availability of prohibited drugs ...' The Bar Association will be hosting a conference on 29 May 2015 to debate the issues raised by the discussion paper.

And almost half of the American states have taken steps to legalise cannabis. Here in Australia we are beginning to debate the issue on medical cannabis and it is looking likely that the illegality of this drug will be dropped for the terminally ill and those with chronic pain.

Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform will have been in existence for 20 years next April and our endeavours to promote change have been long and arduous but change is happening and our efforts have helped that change come about.

FFDLR Activities

Meetings with politicians and significant people

Marion and Brian met with Yvette Berry, Labor member of the ACT Assembly on 11 December, 2013 and discussed the issues of medical marijuana, simple cannabis offence notices and decriminalisation of drugs.

Following on from a meeting late in 2013 members again met with Senator Richard Di Natale on 13 February where the possibility of a drug summit was discussed. Dr Di Natale is the co-chair of the Parliamentary group for Drug Law Reform and was keen to support a drug summit but wanted it to be an all parties event. Brian offered any support FFDLR could give and suggested a possible strategy forward on the Drug Summit. Recently Senator Di Natale announced the tabling of a bill in which the federal government would be responsible for supply of cannabis for medical purposes.

John Ley attended the ACT Green's general meeting about Justice re-investment. Shane Rattenbury, Green's member of the ACT Assembly, wants further discussion on this issue.

Brian, Bill and Marion met with Richard Dennis, CEO of the Australia Institute for strategy advice. He suggested that we had to be ready with 'something in the bottom drawer' when the opportunity arises. He also suggested making ourselves known to all parties, including Clive Palmer. We subsequently wrote to Clive Palmer and received an acknowledgement of our letter.

Marion, Brian and Bill attended a very productive meeting with Susan Helyar, ACTCOSS CEO, on 11th March. The discussions of that meeting included:

- recognition of the important part the Community Coalition on Corrections (CCC) had played in regard to the establishment of the ACT prison and the need for the CCC to be revived. Susan agreed that ACTCOSS would pay for its website to be re-established,
- invitation to submit an article to the June ACTCOSS newsletter which was focussing on 'justice' issues,

- discussion on the social determinants of health and the relevance of drug policy as well as the budgetary implications, and
- invitation to speak at the ACTCOSS conference to be held on 7-8 August.

Bill has been working with Susan on a proposal to partner with ACTCOSS and others on commissioning a paper on the budgetary links to crime. Bill has prepared a paper on this proposal. This is something to work on further in 2015.

At a meeting with Shane Rattenbury on 23 July his draft legislation in favour of Medical Marijuana was discussed. Discussion also took place on the progress or otherwise of the NSP at the AMC. Shane was hopeful for a breakthrough with the prison officers. Also discussed was the throughcare which was showing good preliminary results.

Bill met with Elizabeth Cusack, Senior Manager, Performance Audit, ACT Audit Office . She had been asked to conduct a performance audit of rehabilitation services provided at the AMC for male inmates. Bill was asked to contribute because of his earlier work with the ACT Community Coalition on Corrections during the setting up of the prison. The audit is to be submitted to the Assembly by Christmas 2014. At an earlier meeting between the CCC and the Health Minister performance measures data was provided but this information was ignored.

Attendance at other meetings

Marion and Brian attended a meeting of Elternkreis (a similar group to FFDLR) while visiting Vienna.

Bill attended a Special General meeting of ACTCOSS. Following this meeting there was a review of the Federal Budget outcomes.

Members attended a lunch organised by Hepatitis ACT to commemorate World Hepatitis Day on 28th July.

Membership of other organisations

We are financial members of ACTCOSS, ATODA, HepC Council, and now the UN's Vienna Non-Government Organisations Committee (VNGOC).

Brian continued as a member of the Directions Board during 2014 but did not stand for re-election for 2015

Brian, and Bill in his absence, continued to attend the ACT Drug Strategy Evaluation Group. At one of these meetings Bill put forward the need for a collection of data on people who are excluded from treatment for different reasons. An AIHW report on drug treatment services reported that only 52.9% of people entering treatment services completed the treatment and there is a need to find out why this is so.

Bill and Marion attended a meeting of the Justice Reform Group which is supported by ACTCOSS. This group has morphed from the Community Coalition on Corrections to the Community Integration Group into the now Justice Reform Group. It is a group of community organisations that are concerned about and/or have an interest in the operation of the AMC.

Bill and Marion attend meetings of the Uniting Church Presbytery Social Justice Group which has recently taken on Drug Law Reform as one of its issues for attention.

Attendance at Conferences

We were privileged this year to be offered complimentary registrations which enabled some members to attend the ACTCOSS and ATODA conferences.

The ACTCOSS conference was held on 7th and 8th August at the Ann Harding Conference Centre at the University of Canberra. The topic was "Designing Social Change: Beyond Talk, Taking Action". Bill presented a paper on behalf of FFDLR - 'Drug Law Reform - Pushing uphill for 20 years'. This was an impressive conference with more attention being given to the important part good policy plays in service

delivery than in previous conferences. An excellent summary and video can be found on the ACTCOSS website www.actcoss.org.au/secdevel/conference2014.html

Members attended the ATODA conference held on 24th September. A pre-conference forum on Medical Cannabis held at the Legislative Assembly was also attended by FFDLR members. This conference also showed a move away from being treatment based to more emphasis on policy. A positive attitude towards legalisation was particularly obvious in the papers on medical cannabis.

Submissions

We have not written as many submissions this year as in the past. Presently a submission is being prepared for the ACT Greens proposed legislation to allow people access to cannabis for legitimate medical purposes. The draft bill and discussion paper have been referred to an Assembly committee which has called for formal submissions and will report to the Assembly in June 2015.

Letters written

A letter was sent to Katy Gallagher requesting funding for 20 year book - no reply received

Letter written to Clive Palmer MP introducing the group, explaining the need for politicians to be involved in drug law reform discussion and debate. A thank you response was received.

Letter to NSW Attorney General re medical cannabis and a response was received advising that the AG has instructed NSW Police to use their discretionary powers for those using cannabis for medical purposes.

At the September meeting, following on from a positive statement made by Prime Minister, Tony Abbott on medical cannabis, it was decided to write to Katy Gallagher requesting she re-visit the Heroin Trial. It is intended to have a follow up meeting with Katy. A positive reply was received from Katy at the time of writing this report.

Several letters have been written to editors of newspapers and most have been published. It would be helpful if more of our members could undertake this simple task of writing letters to editors of newspapers,

Guest Speakers at meetings

Guest speaker at the June meeting was Dr Michael Levy, AM, Clinical Director, Justice Health Services, Alexander Maconachie Centre. Michael brought us up to date with the treatment services in the prison and the stalemate around the NSP.

Fiona Trevelyan, CEO Directions ACT spoke at the July meeting on the topic "Meeting the present and future needs of drug and alcohol clients and their families". There was a very poor attendance at this meeting.

Remembrance Ceremony

The 19th Annual Remembrance Ceremony 'for those who lose their lives to illicit drugs' was held on 20th October. Speakers were Shane Rattenbury, MLA; Peter Taylor, father who has lost a son and Charles Foley, Humanist Chaplain. The music was provided by "The Converted". The event was well attended by over 120 people many from rehabilitation centres. We thank especially ATODA, Karralika and the Ted Noffs Association for their support. We were disappointed this year that no media attended the ceremony.

General

It was a great disappointment that the Federal Government decided to defund the 50 year old peak organisation, The Alcohol and other Drug Council of Australia (ADCA) early in the year. One of the many losses here was the promotion of events during Drug Action Week.

The Australia Institute showed interest in having a 'Politics in the Pub' event based on Drug Law Reform. We were asked to make contact with Caitlin Hughes from the DPMP which we did but were disappointed with her response. We are still hoping that this event will run in 2015.

The Global Commission on Drug Policy released a new report in September - Taking Control: Pathways to Drug Policies that Work. The Chair of the Commission is Fernando Henrique Cardoso, Former President of Brazil (1994-2002)

FFDLR donated \$250 toward making a film called "Smarter about Drugs" following two Smarter about Drugs events involving young people and run by Australia21 in Adelaide.

The FFDLR website was updated to include leaders calling for a change from prohibition

We were able to assist Julie Perrin with her research into siblings grief and also Dr Marian Shanahan, Senior Research Fellow at the Drug Policy Modelling Program who was exploring the economic costs to family members affected by drug use.

Discussions began on the possibility of producing a book to commemorate 20 years of Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform.

Some steps were taken to reduce postage costs when it increased to 70c per stamp. More newsletters are now being sent by email.

FFDLR was accepted as a members of the Vienna non-government Organisation Committee (VNGOC) which has some input into the united Nations General Assembly Special Session on Drugs (UNGASS) in 2016..

We made contact with a new organisation Unharm. Will Tregoning is heading this organisation. One of its campaigns is against sniffer dogs at dance parties.

Newsletters were distributed to members and others each month except December and January. We thank Bill for the April Newsletter.

Since commencing Twitter in 2013 we have gained 107 followers, we are following 97 and have sent out 296 tweets. Several of our tweets have been retweeted. Input from members who understand social media would be appreciated.

This year has been our 19th year of existence and some of us who have been there since the beginning are obviously feeling the strain of growing older and feeling the despair that progress is slow. In last year's report I wrote that our membership is not growing and we seem not to be attracting new and or younger members despite a greater awareness in the community for the need for drug law reform. This has not changed.

There is still little doubt that the existence of our organisation has helped to move discussion and debate on drug law reform to the point it is today. But sadly the discussion and debate has not translated into much reform here in Australia and we, as a group are not receiving the media attention we did in the beginning.

In closing this report I would like to thank all those organisations who have supported FFDLR during the year especially ATODA and ACTCOSS who have listened and helped our organisation where they could. We also have a good working relationship with the Department of Health's Alcohol and Other Drugs Policy Unit.

I thank also the 2014 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 font of information and support.

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

Brian McConnell, President - 27/11/2014