



Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform

committed to preventing tragedy that arises from illicit drug use

An open letter to the Prime Minister

**The Hon Kevin Rudd MP
Prime Minister
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600**

An open letter seeking evidence-based drug policies

Dear Prime Minister,

A number of days ago you said that you were preparing to make an announcement on illicit drugs. You have also said that you are determined to tackle homelessness, mental health, education, child protection, and other social problems and that you would bring evidence to bear in policies of your government.

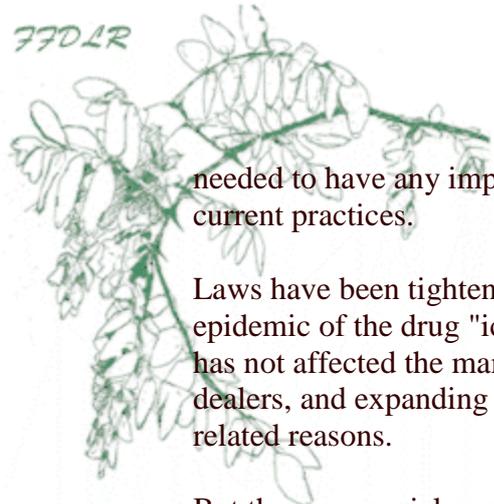
Evidence shows that drugs are a potent factor in a high percentage of all these social problems. No substantial headway in removing the social problems that you have so clearly identified will ever be made unless drug policy is seriously examined. Priority must be given to improving functionality of people with drug problems. But should not necessarily be making them drug free nor attempting to rid Australia of all drugs.

It is these latter issues that has formed the core of thinking about and the implementation of Australia's drug policy.

The outcome of that policy has been somewhat different from that which was expected. We now have a very large profitable black market that has more and better resources than law enforcement; we now have more potent concentrated drugs that are easier to smuggle, some of which need to be injected or inhaled for effect – practices that are not without their extreme dangers. The black market appears to be unstoppable and when squeezed responds like a balloon, bulging with a new more potent drug or the emergence of a new, more cunning Mr Big.

There have been costs - financial costs of in excess of \$7 billion a year for governments and business. Despite the best evidence saying that \$1 spent on drug treatment is up to seven times more effective in reducing supply of drugs, Australian governments spend three times more on law enforcement.

And yet we do not evaluate the effectiveness of our law enforcement approach. The national Crime Authority, shortly before it was abolished, stated that law enforcement only captured about 13% of the heroin that came into the country. Thus failing to capture 87% of the imported heroin in that year. Experts have indicated that a capture rate of better than 60% is



needed to have any impact on the drug market – a figure that is unlikely to be achieved under current practices.

Laws have been tightened and harsher penalties introduced and yet we have the worst epidemic of the drug "ice" coupled with the resurgence of heroin. The outcome of those laws has not affected the market but has widened the net, potentially capturing more users, not dealers, and expanding the population of our jails of which about 80% are there for drug related reasons.

But there are social costs also of our present approach to dealing with illicit drugs. There is an incalculable cost to families. We also know that treatment services are needed yet they are under-resourced. The potential clients of those services have been marginalised and ostracized by society such that many are reluctant to use those services. They are treated punitively by many services that should be there to help and often without thought of the consequences – in the case of my own son, at the time a recent university graduate, who had overdosed and awoke in hospital to the police at the end of his bed eager to make a bust. My son panicked, took a hurried holiday and overdosed and died away from the treatment and family support that he desperately needed. It was an opportunity and a life unnecessarily lost. Many families have similar tragic stories.

Prime Minister, let me be clear, I am not saying that drugs are without danger. They all have dangers, including alcohol as you have noted. It is simply that our attempts to stop their use have not been as effective as it could be and that our approach has introduced many more dangers, sometimes more dangerous than the drugs themselves. Addictive substances whether they be illicit drugs, alcohol or tobacco are not ordinary commodities and should not be treated as such. Nor am I saying all those who use drugs are saints. Many are foolish or reckless young people. But they do not deserve to die because of our indifference to the need to provide the right services. Nor do they deserve to have their life chances destroyed because they have attracted a criminal record for their foolishness.

I know that finding the right balance of solutions will not be easy. We have yet to find that balance. Illicit drug policies need to be based on evidence and importantly all such policies need to be objectively evaluated from a broad perspective at regular intervals. The results of that evaluation would inform the next iteration of drug policy.

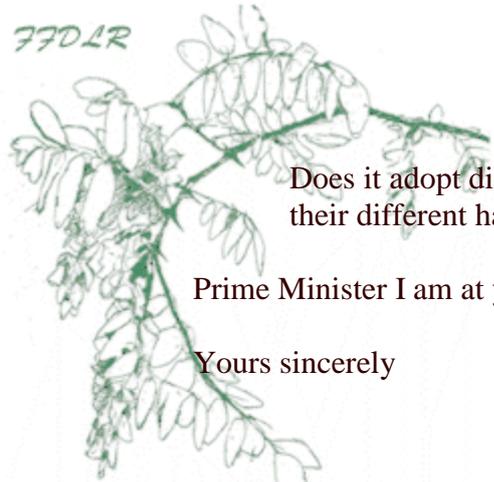
Before making your policy announcement on illicit drugs I ask, no plead, that you subject it to at least the following tests:

Does it provide the best return on investment, in social as well as economic terms, and does it cause the least possible harm to individuals as well as society?

Has the past primary focus on the elimination of supply been the most effective means of reducing harms or is there a better and more balanced alternative?

Does this policy response best address problems associated with those who are dependent on illicit drugs and those users who are not?

Are these measures likely to be most effective in reducing availability?



Does it adopt different strategies to deal with particular drugs having regard to their different harms?

Prime Minister I am at your disposal should you wish to discuss these matters further.

Yours sincerely

Brian McConnell
President