

After 33 Years, I Can No Longer Ignore The Evidence On Drugs

Mick Palmer, *Sydney Morning Herald* (7/6/12)

As a 33-year police practitioner who was commissioner of the Australian Federal Police during the ‘tough on drugs’ period, I fully understand the concerns of those who argue there is no reason to reconsider drug policy and I shared many of them until recent years.

My police experience, in both the state/territory and federal jurisdictions, together with some 15 months practising at the private bar as a defence barrister and several years experience in the drug and alcohol fields, has convinced me that I was wrong.

The reality is that, contrary to frequent assertions, drug law enforcement has had little impact on the Australian drug market. This is true in most countries in the world.

In Australia the police are better resourced than ever, better trained than ever, more effective than ever and yet their impact on the drug trade, on any objective assessment, has been minimal.

In the *Herald* last week, the opposition health spokesman, Peter Dutton, asserted that ‘law enforcement does achieve significant results and is not yet at its peak of effectiveness’. I feel

compelled to respond, because frankly the evidence does not stack up. In Australia last year, 86 per cent of drug users said that obtaining heroin was ‘easy’ or ‘very easy’, while 93 per cent reported that obtaining hydroponic cannabis was ‘easy’ or ‘very easy’.

The price of street heroin and cocaine decreased by more than 80 per cent in the US and Europe in the past 20 years. Despite a huge investment by the US in drug law enforcement, northern Mexico has descended into a drug cartel battlefield, driven by the demand for illicit drugs within the US. At the local level, our young people can and do purchase illicit drugs with ease and generally with impunity. If this is an effective policy at work, I am not sure what failure would look like.

In any conversation, however, it will be important to acknowledge that there are no good guys or bad guys in the debate, only concerned guys. Too often emotion tends to drive public commentary, with proponents of either side branding their opponents as either ‘soft on drugs loopies’ or ‘the prohibitionist Gestapo’. Neither label is correct or adds value to the debate.

Mr Dutton argues that supporters of the present policy are just as well informed

on the subject as those arguing for consideration of change. The truth is I have found it difficult to find informed commentators willing to support the present drug policy. The Australia 21 report was largely based on a roundtable discussion which included two former senior law enforcement officials, two former Commonwealth ministers for health, a former ACT chief minister, two former state Labor premiers, many of Australia's leading drugs researchers and clinicians, parents who had lost children to drugs and two very impressive young people.

The report came to the same general conclusion as the 2011 report of the Global Commission on Drug Policy, which included former presidents of four countries, a former UN secretary-general, a former chairman of the US Federal Reserve and a former US secretary of state.

One of the advocates for drug law reform in South America is Otto Perez Molina, the President of Guatemala, who used to be in charge of drug law enforcement in his country.

We owe it to future generations to be realistic; to be prepared to listen and consider these commentaries and to examine the facts and the options.

Mr Dutton also cautions against the use of experience of other countries that have benefited from liberalising drug policy.

I ask a counter question: why, in the face of a poorly-performing policy, should Australia not attempt to benefit from the international drug policy experience, when we try to learn from international policy advances and errors in every other area?

The more liberal approach to drug policy in Switzerland and Portugal in the past 20 years appears to have achieved many benefits with no serious adverse effects.

In contrast, drug overdose deaths are high and rising in Sweden, one of the last developed countries that champions a punitive drug policy.

In recent decades, Australian governments have relied heavily on drug law enforcement (while providing more limited funding for health and social responses), yet the drug market has continued to expand. Around the world, drug production has increased, drug consumption has increased, the number of new kinds of drugs has increased, drugs are readily available, drug prices have decreased and the purity of street drugs has increased.

It's time the community and its leaders had the courage to look at this issue with fresh eyes.

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