



'Can Australia respond to drugs more effectively and safely?'

Summary of Australia21's third report on drug law reform

The Australian media carries stories about illicit drugs on an almost daily basis. This coverage reflects not only a widespread anxiety about the threat of illicit drugs to young Australians, but also a growing awareness that 'we cannot arrest and imprison our way out of this intractable mess'.

Australia21 gathered for a one day Roundtable involving 11 senior and experienced law and law enforcement officials, supplemented by five people from drug services and drug research, to consider how Australia could start to make some progress in this difficult field.

Like most other countries, Australia has over the last half-century relied heavily on efforts to control the supply of illicit drugs. The results have been disappointing. During this period the drug market has continued to expand and become more dangerous. Even worse, drug-related deaths, disease, crime, corruption, violence and threats to national security have increased.

Senior law enforcement leaders and prominent politicians have acknowledged that our current approach offers little hope for improved outcomes. Meanwhile, the international drug policy consensus has begun to unravel. In recent years a growing list of countries has started to treat illicit drugs as primarily a health and social issue, requiring far more political and financial investment in these areas. A number of countries have reduced or eliminated penalties for drug possession for personal consumption. Some have started to regulate cannabis, establish drug consumption rooms, and provide treatment with pharmaceutical heroin for people with severe and intractable problems. The results of these approaches have been encouraging. About a dozen new measures were discussed and broadly supported by the Roundtable.

Several decades ago Australia gained an international reputation as a country willing to try new approaches to protect our health and well-being. Our politicians from several parties worked well together and managed the transition to pragmatism superbly. But the capacity to continue the reform process dried up. For many years, countries in Western Europe and the Americas have been the ones trying new approaches while Australia has just looked on. Our capacity for reform has been gridlocked.

Meanwhile, Australia's drug problems have grown steadily worse. Australia21's first report on illicit drugs argued the case that our national approach to drugs was failing to deliver the sorts of outcomes we were entitled to expect. Our second report on drugs argued that other countries were now benefitting from changing their approach. In this, Australia21's third report on illicit drugs, a Roundtable dominated by senior people from a law and law enforcement background endorsed 13 specific strategies.

Essentially, this approach involves: reducing and where possible eliminating penalties for drug possession and use; expanding and improving the health and social assistance provided to our young people with drug problems; and, where possible, undermining the black market for illicit drugs with a regulated 'white' market. But retail sale of quantities of high purity drugs such as heroin, cocaine and ice is now illegal and we believe should always be illegal. Australia21 makes no apology for emphasising that we hope Australia's approach to drug policy reform will be incremental and dominated by rigorous evaluation.

The political and other difficulties in attempting to regulate as much of the drug market as possible should not be under-estimated. But the health, social and economic costs of continuing a 'business as usual' approach are also clearly growing. For many years, a dysfunctional drug policy has had poor outcomes, except for politicians playing for a 'tough on drugs', 'law and order' image. Those days of fear-mongering appear to be coming to an end.

Not only have attempts to reduce the supply of drugs been disappointing, but also attempts to reduce the demand for drugs. Young people increasingly growing up in a world with shrinking hope for the future find a brief chemical vacation an attractive alternative to limited education and employment opportunities. The consequences of growing inequality cannot be ignored indefinitely: we have to achieve a major reduction in severe poverty.

Australia21 seeks to start a national conversation about the conclusions and recommendations in this report. We hope that the political culture in drug policy will soon be changed and that an area dominated for many years by moralism, stigma and fear campaigns will increasingly be dominated by compassion, respect for evidence, cost effectiveness, respect for the rule of law and a search for better outcomes. We support a drug policy which aims to improve the health and wellbeing of people who use drugs, their families and communities, while minimising financial and other costs to the community and government.

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