

Views From the Drugs Summit

The jury is still out on whether the Drugs Summit was a political set piece. The Opposition participants regularly accused the Government of just that. Without doubt, however, it was the reaction of the Opposition which was orchestrated and pre-conceived.

From the first morning of the Summit discussion, it was apparent that the real decisions would be made in the working groups. These were small and representative panels chaired by an appropriate Government minister and given broad topics for consideration such as the link between drugs and crime, law enforcement and the drug problem, education strategies, and the enhancement of treatment. Each working group commenced its discussion around a brief paper prepared by bureaucrats from an associated government department. Opposition spokesmen later confused this with their allegation that the Government had prepared the agenda for discussion. There was clearly, in the group in which I participated, a quick and constant divergence from the limits of the working paper; and discussions ranged across a wide variety of interests, some of which were introduced as pet issues from working group participants.

It was evident from the deliberations in many of the working groups that it was the politicians who were keen to polarise the debate, and to confuse and divert discussion which would lead to consensus. This was in stark contrast with the surprisingly flexible attitude of some of the advisers to the working groups, drawn from the street level agencies such as the Police, the Health Department, methadone maintenance services, drug rehabilitation clinics, and the social welfare sector. I was challenged by the manner in which police inspectors from Kings Cross, and needle exchange workers from the same area could discuss their street experiences, see the other person's point of view, and suggest strategies for compromise and collaborative endeavour. A police officer indicated to me that a motivation behind this atmosphere of empathy and the desire for consensus was an understanding of the urgency of the crisis which they met daily. They were tired of the politics of drug law enforcement and they were frustrated with the appearance that the Drugs Summit would degenerate into just another political exercise. At the conclusion of the Summit, one of the youth representatives and a drug user who had spoken of her experience proffered the view the Summit would have been better without politicians involved.

The working groups developed their policies and proposals over the first few days of the Summit. The majority of the groups seemed to come easily to agreement on general themes. However, in the contentious area of drugs and crime, and law enforcement, such consensus was confounded or illusory. The working group in which I participated wrestled with crucial questions such as the removal of the offence of self administration, the liberalisation of marijuana use laws (and the introduction of a cautionary scheme for first offenders), the extension of the jurisdiction of the drugs courts, the enhancement of diversion programs, the endorsement of safe injecting rooms, and the possibility of a state sanctioned heroin trial. It was clear that the last two of these initiatives in particular would need careful management when they were presented to the Summit for plenary debate.

Constant themes which emerged from the Summit presentations were:

1. The poverty of the treatment sector and the urgent need for the injection of resources.
2. The failure of drug law enforcement policies and the propensity for the criminalisation

of drug use to compound the crime picture.

3. The need for a sophisticated education awareness program.
4. The importance of the opinion of young people in understanding drug use in all its forms.
5. The necessity for governments to commit to an expansive and integrated drug control and treatment policy.
6. The need to generate public awareness around the drug issue.
7. The importance of a voice for drug users in the formulation of control and treatment policies.

Through a sensitive scheduling of speakers and presentations, government critics, treatment workers, users and young people played a vital role in the construction of the Summit's understanding of the problems before them. This was enhanced by the uniquely sensitive chairing of Ian Sinclair and Joan Kerner.

For me the highlights of the formal presentations were the declarations of personal experience from several past and current drug users. Along with the reflections of family members who suffer with the users, these contributions to the Summit had a telling impact on those politicians and policy makers ready and able to develop their views and open their minds. I was encouraged by the comments of an otherwise conservative rural Labor member who indicated that his narrow opposition to drug use and the drug user had been profoundly influenced by his experience of the views and lives of drug users in New South Wales through the mechanism of the Summit. He had become aware that we were dealing with people and not demons.

The proposals to emerge from the working groups were coordinated and restructured into a format which made them suitable for general debate through the Thursday afternoon and evening plenary. At least one able Government minister played a crucial role in the positioning of these proposals for debate so as to ensure the conclusion of the Summit's views on all proposals very late on Thursday.

The contentious issues remained until last. And almost on cue, the religious right of the Opposition and smaller parties opposed any proposals which implied a liberalisation of a total abstinence position. Interestingly, however, the more powerful shadow ministers on the Opposition side left it to several mavericks to present the hard line. This was softened in a rather cynical way by the Opposition's constant call for radical resourcing of treatment and its education programs. Treatment was always here conceived, however, as the response to those who might have slipped through a relentless criminal justice net.

To the surprise of many and the relief of most, the major agreed outcomes for the Summit were:

1. The allocation of significant resources for treatment and education.
2. The introduction of cautioning for first time marijuana users.
3. The removal of imprisonment as a penalty for the use of small amounts of marijuana.
4. The abolition of the offence of self-administration.
5. The acceptance of safe injecting rooms.
6. The commitment to needle exchange and harm minimisation programs.

The proposal for a Government sponsored heroin trial in New South Wales was narrowly lost. On this proposal, a number of significant Government members, and some of the treatment lobby moved against the proposal.

Despite the instances of polarisation, a lasting impression for me of the Summit, was the common ground which so many of those working in the drugs field are willing to share. Also what became clear was that the position on drug control so often put by the Prime Minister and his few advisers, talk-back radio hosts, and the State Opposition is not in any way a reflection of the sensitive and amenable attitudes of those who know and live the drug problem.

Encouragingly, in the recent State budget significant resources were put behind the treatment commitments made at the Summit. The challenge now faces the Government to make the necessary legislative and law enforcement changes to bring into operation some of the more enlightened and important recommendations to arise from the Summit. In case the Government loses its courage on this, it should be reminded that the majority of these proposals involve nothing more than bringing us in line with law enforcement practice in Victoria and the lower end of legislative reality in South Australia.

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