

## Drugs and politics time for a better approach

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The Australian National Council on Drugs, the peak independent non-government advisory body to Government on drug policy established by the Prime Minister in March 1998, has today called on all political parties to resist the temptation to try and score points from each other on drug issues.

Chairman of the Council, Major Brian Watters, stated Drugs, including alcohol and tobacco, adversely affect a large section of the community including many families and individuals. All politicians need to recognize that for many people, particularly those suffering from the consequences of drug use crime, violence, family breakdowns and loss of life - this is far too an important issue to be treated as a political football. In fact the Council has recently written to the Federal leaders of Australian Labor Party and the Australian Democrats seeking meetings to foster a possible cross party approach to drugs.

Major Watters added - "The Council believes that it is imperative that we all recognize and understand the extraordinarily high level of achievement that Australia has reached over a number of years in dealing with the issue of drugs. We have a tremendous level of co-operation between law enforcement and health sectors and should recognize and applaud the achievements of both sectors. We also currently have one of the most comprehensive package of drug related policies and programs in the world. The Australian concept of working in partnership, especially between the community and government, is an approach that clearly demonstrates the high level of commitment we have in this country to try and effectively deal with drugs. It would be unfortunate if that partnership was undermined by political point scoring

It is also important not to single out individual components of an expansive drug strategy as somehow having a responsibility for addressing all the issues surrounding drugs. For instance, lets look at the valuable and increasingly successful role of police and customs in reducing the supply of large shipments of drugs into this country. No-one believes that supply interdiction on its own will resolve the drugs issue but not having it at all would only mean having large quantities of drugs enter the country unhindered and losing any chance we have to contain the activities of organized crime. We need to look at the impact of all of our strategies and how they are working together. Whilst there will always be room for improvement we also need to create an environment to allow for a range of approaches."

Mr Gino Vumbaca, Executive Officer for the Council added that - "A debate that depicts the drug issue as being some sort of battle between advocates of a war on drugs or zero tolerance and those advocating harm reduction or anti-prohibition is not really helpful. There is clearly a need for a number of strategies to be implemented if we are to achieve a reduction in the supply and demand for drugs. Just as there is not one treatment solution for all drug users, there is not one simple strategy for all drug issues. We must remember that we are all committed to helping the community and individuals affected by drug use. Trying to work together to achieve this makes more sense than working against each other."

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