

"Life is inherently disappointing...."

Sydney Drug Summit recommends legalisation

Mike Head, Linda Tenenbaum
27 May 1999

"The view I reached is that life is an inherently disappointing experience for most human beings." So said Bob Carr, Labor Premier of New South Wales in an interview with the *Sydney Morning Herald* at the end of the recent week-long Drug Summit in Sydney.

Concluding that it was time to move towards the official toleration of drug usage, he went on: "Some people just can't cope with that and so you have an epidemic of these substances."

"My view is that this comprises the problem: a propensity of human beings to compensate for the mediocrity of existence and that it is there, it is available."

It is hard to imagine a more cynical and callous outlook, or a more blatant admission of political bankruptcy. The present conditions are a *fait accompli*, and nothing can or will be done about them. Those people who "can't cope", should simply be helped along the road of self-destruction.

Long gone is any conception of positive social reform, of changing social life for the better. Neither Carr, nor the journalist interviewing him, even countenanced the idea that perhaps something should be done to address the underlying problems. None of the 135 Members of Parliament nor the 80 invited guests at the Drug Summit bothered themselves with the obvious questions: Why is life intolerable for the majority of people? What policies and programs have been responsible for creating such conditions? Why do so many, particularly the young, feel the need to turn to drugs? Why, for them, is the future so bleak?

To consider these issues would be to probe the very basis of the present economic and social order, something that remains entirely out of bounds in the

media and official political circles.

Deaths from heroin overdoses are increasing at a staggering rate. Last year the Australian toll exceeded 600, up 10 percent in just 12 months, on top of a 13 percent rise the year before. Just a decade ago, the loss of life was about a quarter of that. Official figures indicate that the number of drug-addicted people has grown to more than 200,000 nationally, trebling during the 1990s.

Faced with this terrible state of affairs, the Summit participants chose to accommodate themselves to it, moving to legalise drug abuse while at the same time strengthening police powers. If eventually adopted by the Carr government, the 168 proposals recommended by the Summit will only serve to exacerbate the current crisis.

They include:

- Establishment of local heroin injecting rooms by charitable and community organisations under police supervision.
- Legalisation of the self-administration of drugs such as heroin and cocaine.
- Decriminalisation of the cultivation and possession of small quantities of cannabis.
- Greater police powers to conduct undercover and "sting" operations to entrap drug traffickers and their clients.

Adoption of these proposals—they will be considered by the government over the next six weeks—will see New South Wales becoming the first Australian state to set up approved heroin-injecting rooms. A proposal for government-run heroin trials, already under consideration by the conservative government in the Australian Capital Territory, was narrowly defeated.

With regard to cannabis, New South Wales would join South Australia, where a Liberal Party government allows the personal use of marijuana. In Victoria, the other main industrial state, Premier Jeff Kennett advocates similar laws.

The shift toward official toleration has become bipartisan as far as the major political parties are concerned. A number of leading politicians from the opposition Liberal Party joined Carr and other Labor leaders in voting for the Summit's proposals, as did prominent doctors, judges, users' advocates and family support groups.

Behind the growing consensus in political, media and business circles lie several considerations. The first is economic. In its editorial last Saturday, the *Sydney Morning Herald* quoted remarks made to the Summit by Justice James Wood, who headed the Carr government's royal commission into police corruption. He spoke of an inadequate system that “costs us dearly in terms of loss of friends and family, property loss and escalating insurance premiums, escalating health and law enforcement budgets and, where I came in, the risk of police corruption, and the enslavement of young people through prostitution to feed a drug habit.”

In other words, prohibition fails the cost-benefit test. It would be cheaper to supply addicts with daily dosages. To be sure, Carr and other politicians deny this is their intention, claiming not to have “given up the fight”. Some of the funds saved will reportedly be earmarked for drug education and treatment programs, but only a pittance compared to what is needed. No one seriously suggests that such measures will overcome or even stem the drugs epidemic.

Another consideration is that it is infinitely preferable to the official establishment to have a significant proportion of the youth befuddled by drugs than to face a broad social movement opposed to the long-term unemployment, lack of opportunity and social inequality confronting most young people. Moreover, relentless job destruction has reduced the need of employers for a large, alert and drug-free workforce.

One final factor cannot be ignored. Drug trafficking has become a highly profitable global industry. Its estimated international proceeds of \$US500 billion per year are thoroughly integrated into the international financial markets. At the same time, drugs have become the number one cash crop in entire regions of the world.

For all the hype about police crackdowns on peddlers and dealers, those who run the industry enjoy protection at the highest levels.

The answer to drug abuse does not lie in the continued harassment and punishment of the drug trade's victims. Nor does it lie in the “normalisation” and “harm minimisation” orientation now becoming fashionable in ruling circles. It lies in tackling the problem at its source: transforming conditions for the majority of the population so that life becomes a challenging and fulfilling experience, not a “disappointing” and “mediocre” one.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact