

Push for marijuana 'decrim' in Australia

by Our Melbourne Bureau

A fight is raging in Australia, over the decriminalization and/or legalization of marijuana and other dangerous drugs. As *EIR* documented in an Aug. 29, 1997 feature story, the pro-drug campaign is being led by such associates of the British Rothschild family as speculator George Soros and Australian media magnate Kerry Packer. On the other side, the Citizens Electoral Council (CEC), the Australian branch of the LaRouche movement, is mobilizing under the slogan, "Australia needs a *real* war on drugs."

A test case for the decriminalization effort is the state of Victoria, where Police Commissioner Neil Comrie said, in an interview published in *The Age* on March 9, that it was "highly likely" that he would soon order that people caught with small amounts of marijuana would be given only a "caution." Such a policy is in violation of state law.

A CEC-led mobilization defeated a 1996 attempt by Victorian Premier Jeff Kennett to decriminalize marijuana, so now Kennett and his collaborators, such as Comrie, are sneaking it through the back door.

In January, the Australian Bureau of Criminal Intelligence, which Comrie heads, issued a report calling for the decriminalization of cannabis. The ABCI is the nation's crime intelligence clearinghouse for the state police forces. Its report said that over 81% of drug arrests are cannabis-related, and that if possession and cultivation of cannabis were decriminalized, it "could result in a big reduction in the resources committed to controlling the drug."

The report rejected evidence that cannabis is a "gateway" drug which leads to using harder drugs. Instead, the report claimed that relaxing cannabis laws could discourage users from progressing to harder drugs, such as heroin. Other key points of the report include the claim that opium production is unlikely to decrease; that cocaine has become more readily available and prices have dropped; and that police crackdowns on amphetamine production have turned people toward heroin, so police resources would be better utilized pursuing harder drugs.

Comrie said in a television interview on Jan. 15: "It's obvious current policies are not working. . . . We need a much more flexible approach. . . . The Victorian government has adopted the 'harm minimization' approach—that's where we minimize the harm that drugs can do."

Comrie has already introduced de facto decriminalization into Victoria, in the high-unemployment areas of northwest

Melbourne, with what he calls the "cautionary system." He claims that the system appears to have been successful, and now sees "no reason why we would not be introducing that cautionary system right across the state." When asked by the interviewer whether he supported free heroin being made available to addicts, Comrie replied, "I have an open mind on heroin trials."

At a forum held in Melbourne on March 30, Comrie protested, in the face of growing criticism, that his philosophy of "harm minimization" did not mean "going soft on drugs." Melbourne's Lord Mayor Ivan Deveson, an advocate of decriminalization, announced at the same meeting that the Melbourne Council would spend \$75,000 to conduct a study of intravenous drug-use in the city. "No family is immune. . . . There is no magic solution that will solve the drug issue for us," he said. "As a community, we need to set aside our individual differences and recommit ourselves to a fresh approach to tackling the problem of illicit drugs."

For its part, the Federal government of Prime Minister John Howard is not going along with the decriminalization push, and recently announced a \$100 million drug strategy, which would set up new links with overseas law enforcement agencies. However, as Luke Cornelius, the National Secretary of the Federal Police Association has charged (see *Interview*), Howard's extra \$100 million does not compensate for the earlier huge budget cuts in law enforcement made by his own government, which crippled drug enforcement strategies.

Effects of marijuana use

Further fueling the national debate, a study by the National Drug and Alcohol Research Center at the University of New South Wales, has revealed that four out of ten long-term cannabis users are "severely dependent" on the drug, and nine out of ten are "dependent" on it, *The Age* reported on Feb. 1. Comparing cannabis abusers to alcoholics, Wendy Swift, who led the study, explained that people trying to give up cannabis could experience similar withdrawal symptoms to what alcoholics experienced. "The sorts of things people report are insomnia, depression, anxiety, appetite fluctuation—usually loss of appetite, and some people get night sweats and wake up soaking in sweat. They [withdrawal symptoms] go, but it can cause people to relapse and use it again. They can't sleep—that seems to be the biggest problem," she said.

The rather frank reporting of the effects of cannabis addiction from the study is surprising, given the pro-decriminalization stance of the National Drug and Alcohol Research Center, which is one of the main exponents of Soros's "harm minimization" philosophy.

The study was based upon interviews with 200 cannabis users, aged 18-57, in Sydney, and it was found that a high proportion of them were dependent on the drug, while one in three said that they had a problem with cannabis use. It was also found that they had a higher rate of long-term respiratory conditions than other people their age.