



# NATIONAL DRUGS SUMMIT

## A HEALTH APPROACH TO ILLICIT DRUGS

*The Greens' new approach to the war on drugs*

Despite billions of dollars of public money and decades of policing, we have made little difference to the supply and use of illicit drugs. Instead we are making the problem worse by criminalising young people and driving the problem underground. The Greens care about keeping people healthy and keeping families together. We will lead a national discussion about finding a better way.

Former politicians and police are increasingly happy to say what public health experts have been pointing out for a long time – the war on drugs has not reduced the harms of illicit drug use. Locking up someone for using cannabis, for example, imposes enormous harm on that individual and comes at an enormous cost to society. Only the Greens are willing to stand up in Parliament and ask the question – “Is there a better way?”

### > A NEW APPROACH TO ILLICIT DRUGS

The Greens have long joined calls by the public health community, former world leaders, and experienced police to end the use of criminal penalties to penalise drug users. A comprehensive approach to substance abuse will require a new approach from police, health services, prisons and all levels of government. Therefore, the Greens will:

- **Immediately convene a national drugs summit**, bringing together health experts, police and government to discuss a new way forward on illicit drugs;
- **Task the Productivity Commission with an inquiry** into the costs and benefits of the current approach and alternative, health focused ways of dealing with the problem.

### > A HEALTH PROBLEM

Addiction to illicit drugs, just like alcoholism, is a health problem. When somebody is suffering from addiction, the threat of criminal penalties cannot compare with the urgent signals they are receiving from their own body.

Every year 400 Australians die from using illicit drugs<sup>i</sup>, and many more suffer severe health impacts. Public health experts have for a long time been saying that people need treatment, not

incarceration. The national summit will include health experts who work every day with affected people.

### > ECONOMIC COMMON SENSE

The policing of our current illicit drugs strategy costs the country more than \$2.5 billion a year<sup>ii</sup>. This is far outweighed by the social costs, which are well over an extra \$8b per annum.<sup>iii</sup>

Australia can save on the direct costs of policing and the social costs of the current policy. The Productivity Commission would be tasked with a thorough analysis of the costs and benefits, including the costs of crime, policing and prisons; our spending on treatment; and justice reinvestment.

### > A MORE CARING APPROACH

While many former politicians have called for a new approach to drugs policy – and many serving politicians will do so privately – the debate in Australia has suffered from a lack of leadership. Law and order politics and a fear of being depicted as “soft on crime” have delayed reform for too long.

The Greens’ care about health and we are willing to listen to the evidence. Our policy is based on public health and human rights principles. The national summit on illicit drugs will bring all sectors of society together to chart a course for reform guided by this new approach.

<sup>i</sup> Australia21 report on illicit drugs policy, [http://www.australia21.org.au/our\\_research/illicit\\_drugs.html](http://www.australia21.org.au/our_research/illicit_drugs.html)

<sup>ii</sup> “The Cost of the War on Drugs” Sydney Morning Herald, October 3, 2009

<sup>iii</sup> Australia21 report