

Speech Notes for the Opening Session of
The International Drug Policy Symposium
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by

Hon Max Bradford, Chair, NSAD

The Honourable Peter Dunne, the many invited overseas and New Zealand speakers, distinguished guests from home and abroad, ladies and gentlemen.

On behalf of the NZ Society on Alcohol and Drug Dependence (NSAD), I welcome you to this joint NZ Drug Foundation/NSAD drug policy symposium.

The genesis for this symposium is the forthcoming Misuse of Drugs Act review being undertaken by the Government, as well as a number of supporting or parallel pieces of domestic legislation.

In addition, we all have an interest in the 2009 UNGASS (United Nations General Assembly Special Session) evaluation of how well the 1998 UNGASS drug policy declaration has worked in practice.

More importantly perhaps, it is to be hoped that the Special Session will provide some useful pointers in shaping our domestic drug policy.

While New Zealand can claim to some leadership in the whole-of-government approach to drug policy, there is much we can learn from the experience of other countries and organisations from abroad.

In this respect, can I express our appreciation to the overseas participants here today. Your views and wisdom are eagerly anticipated.

Let me say a few words about NSAD.

The organisation has been around for a long time, having been formed in 1954.

We are the second longest established voluntary organisation in New Zealand in its field.

Like most organisations of long standing, NSAD has transmogrified a number of times to meet the challenges of alcohol and drug addiction.

In the 1950s through to the mid-1970s, the state had little interest in alcoholism, and none in drugs. It was the age of the volunteer, with great difficulty in attracting funding from anywhere.

Alcoholism in those days was a hidden curse, not dealt with in an open way by society having regard to the addictive disease that it often is.

From the 1970s through to the mid-1990s, the statutorily created and government financed agency Alcohol Advisory Council of NZ (ALAC) provided funding to an increasing number of “competitive” bodies addressing alcohol issues.

By then NSAD had to deal with drugs other than alcohol – which ALAC was not funded for and still isn’t. NSAD’s challenge was to seek other forms of fundraising and treatment policies for the emerging challenge of dealing with drugs as well as alcohol.

Since the 1990s, NSAD has evolved a very successful service delivery body, through Care (NZ) Ltd, where funding is provided through contestable contractual arrangements with government agencies and the private sector.

NSAD’s focus of attention in recent years has thus been on treatment and harm reduction.

Important as this focus is, it is “ambulance at the bottom of a cliff” stuff.

The real challenge for drug and alcohol policy is to eliminate or minimize the emergence of drugs and alcohol as a societal issue in the first place.

That is why we have joined forces with the Drug Foundation to co-sponsor the symposium. The Foundation’s wider policy focus, and NSAD’s harm reduction and treatment focus are a good fit.

In 1954, drugs other than alcohol were virtually unknown.

How things have changed, and unfortunately for the worse.

One thing hasn't changed though.

The dreadful toll of illness, blighted lives, and family violence is as much with us in 2009 as it was in 1954, five decades ago.

Indeed, there are few who would argue against the notion that the toll is much worse, given the pernicious and sometimes deadly effect of the many hard core drugs available.

This deadly effect is often now combined with criminal activity and the creation of multi-billion dollar international criminal empires which even the largest and richest of nation states are incapable of eliminating.

So what has been achieved in 55 years?

Have all the collective efforts of the many organisations and the veritable treasuries of taxpayer dollars spent in a half a century failed our societies?

Of course they have.

That's what makes this symposium so important.

It is a chance to take a hard and honest look at the continuum of policies which make up our national drug policy.

It is – equally importantly – an opportunity to join with other countries and organisations to face up to the globalization of the drug problem where no one country can deal with its own drug problem on its own.

It is a chance to see if the policies actually work in practice.

Are they effective in achieving the overarching goal expressed in the latest grand declaration in the *NZ National Drug Policy 2007-2012*; namely to:

"... prevent and reduce the health, social and economic harms that are linked to tobacco, alcohol, illegal and other drug use"?

The 3 pillars of the present policy are supply control; demand reduction; and problem limitation.

The presence at this symposium of NZ representatives from the police, the courts, political parties, the health sector, the voluntary sector, and the Law Commission attests to the importance of the whole-of-government approach in forming and executing the policy framework.

It is an important component of this country's approach to drug and alcohol policy.

But we must ask ourselves whether this is enough, given that the measured statistics of outcomes are discouraging at the big picture level.

Progress has been made, but the terrible aftermath of increasing drug use, especially of the more poisonous types increasingly available, and the emergence of binge drinking amongst young adults, suggests we have a long way to go before we can claim to have an effective and practical drug and alcohol policy.

Organisations like the Salvation Army, NSAD and the health system can mitigate the harmful effects, and that is important.

But in the end, the long term solution has to lie in effective health, education, and prevention policies which deal to the root of the problems: access and addiction.

It is of little comfort that we share the same problems as many other countries, but as they say, a problem shared is a problem – hopefully - solved.

The NSAD looks forward to your deliberations on one of the most insidious and demanding of societal challenges we face in these increasingly stressful times.

Hon Max Bradford
Chair
NSAD