



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**PRIVATE MEMBERS BUSINESS**

**Drugs: Strategies**

**SPEECH**

**Monday, 20 September 1999**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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## SPEECH

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**Questioner**  
**Speaker** Andrews, Kevin, MP

**Source** House  
**Proof** No  
**Responder**  
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**Mr ANDREWS** (Menzies) (1.29 pm)—Since coming to power in 1996, the Howard government has been distinguished not just by its good economic housekeeping, which has thus far enabled us to weather the economic meltdown in Asia; it has also shown an old-fashioned concern with moral values. It has shown this in the strong standards taken to limit the ownership and accessibility of high-powered automatic firearms in the community in the wake of the Port Arthur massacre. It has shown this in doing what the Prime Minister, John Howard, has called the 'right thing' by taking the leadership on East Timor in the international community. For, contrary to what Margaret Thatcher once said, there is indeed a society and we have to work hard to nurture it.

Licit and illicit drug taking undermines society in the most palpable and fundamental of ways. The economic and social costs of drug taking are enormous. It is estimated by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare that in 1997 there were over 22,000 drug related deaths and more than a quarter of a million hospital episodes. The licit drugs—tobacco and alcohol—accounted for over 96 per cent of the drug related deaths and hospitalisations. The estimated direct health care costs of drug dependence and harmful use in Australia in 1992 were \$1 billion—\$833 million for tobacco, \$145 million for alcohol and \$43 million for illicit drugs. The economic cost associated with the prevention and treatment of drug related illness, loss of productivity in the workplace, property crime, theft, accidents and law enforcement activity has been estimated to be in excess of \$18 billion. Almost 67 per cent of this is attributable to tobacco use, 24 per cent to alcohol use and about nine per cent to illicit drug use.

The 1993 national drug strategy replaced the Labor government's national campaign against drug abuse as a result of evaluations suggesting that there was need for improved strategic direction and closer cooperation between agencies responsible for law enforcement and health. The basis of the strategy is to minimise the harmful effects of drugs and drug use in Australian society. In 1997 Professor Eric Single from the University of Toronto and Professor Rohl from the Australian Institute of Police Management evaluated the national drug strategy. Their report, released in July 1997, concluded that Australia's national drug strategy is recognised as one of the most progressive and respected drug strategies in the world.

Contrary to what the mover of this motion would put in here, Mr Deputy Speaker, and contrary to the suggestions made by the member for Gellibrand, who spoke before me in this debate, the Tough on Drugs strategy is not and never has been a zero tolerance policy comparable to the policing strategy used to clean up New York and also evidenced in the 'two strikes and you're out' policing policy in the Northern Territory. It is a total misnomer to call it a 'zero tolerance' policy. This would suggest that criminal penalties rather than education, treatment and rehabilitation are the guiding force of the policy. The only areas where the drug strategy is asserting that there should be no tolerance is in the encouragement of drug taking in schools and in the dealing in drugs.

I quote the federal health minister, who said in February of this year:

I have talked about zero tolerance in schools, I have talked about zero tolerance to people who are dealing and profiting from drugs, but our approach to people who use drugs has always been one of tolerance. And if you have a look at the practicality of what we have funded, what we have done, what we have done in my portfolio in the last two years, it is a highly tolerant approach, one that is based on treatment, rehabilitation, education and where appropriate, the reduction or minimization of harm.

The Howard government's Tough on Drugs strategy is to quote the Chief Executive of the Alcohol and Other Drugs Council of Australia, who said it was, 'the first time any government in Australia has made such a significant financial commitment to reducing the level of drug related harm in Australia.' No-one in this debate, no-one in this place, can pretend that there are quick fixes to this problem. The Howard government has demonstrated on this issue, as on others, that it can assume a leadership role. The national drug strategy has four years to run its course. In the meantime, the government is showing its commitment and resolve to reducing the harm being done to individuals and to society as a whole by drug taking, both licit and illicit. It should be commended for that. The opposition offers no credible fixes, only cheap shots. (*Time expired*)