

Australia Dossier by Robert Barwick

Last Hurrah for a 'Drug Lord'

Establishment doyen Dr. David Penington is still pushing illegal drugs, on his way to retirement.

Australia's premier drug legalization champion, Dr. David Penington, has escalated his war *for* drugs, with the Nov. 13 release of his final report as chairman of the Victoria state government's Drug Policy Expert Committee. Pushing harm minimization, i.e., legalization by stealth, it calls for legalizing the act of injecting illicit drugs (but not the possession of those drugs), and for an official heroin trial, in which heroin would be medically prescribed to addicts.

On Nov. 22, the Lyndon LaRouche-allied Citizens Electoral Council (CEC) Senate candidate for Victoria, Noelene Isherwood, blasted Penington. "In his latest so-called 'findings,' Penington is merely continuing what he has been doing all along—pushing drugs for the establishment," Isherwood charged.

Heroin use in Australia has exploded since harm minimization was adopted by the federal government as policy in 1986. On Nov. 22, the University of New South Wales National Drug and Alcohol Research Center reported that the number of heroin addicts in Australia has doubled over the past decade, to about 74,000, or 7 out of 1,000 adults between the ages of 15 and 54, up from 34,000 in 1984-87. The death rate from heroin overdoses has skyrocketed to more than 730 per year; in Victoria, one in four prison inmates injects drugs, four-fifths of them sharing syringes.

Since his appointment as head of the Victoria Premier's Drug Advisory Council in 1995 by then-Premier Jeff Kennett, and as chairman of the Drug Policy Expert Committee, Penington has run drug policy in the state of Vic-

toria, and has become the nation's leading agitator for drug legalization. His main campaigns over the years have been for the decriminalization of marijuana use and possession, and a national trial for legally prescribed heroin. Although a mobilization by the CEC defeated the marijuana decriminalization push in 1996, and the heroin trial was knocked on the head by the federal government two years later, the worsening drug crisis reflects Penington's successes: Only one of his latest schemes—that users who have just taken heroin or other drugs should escape police action, even if caught with syringes—has been rejected outright by the present Victoria government of Premier Steve Bracks.

Under Penington, Victoria has embarked on legalization experiments, including needle distribution centers, zones where first-time drug offenders are just "cautioned" by police, and heroin "shooting galleries" (a.k.a., "safe" injecting rooms). The latter are still in the planning stage, but these experiments have sparked fierce opposition in the Melbourne suburbs that are being used as laboratories.

In the Nov. 4 *News Weekly*, Isobel Gawler, secretary of the federal Drug Advisory Council of Australia, reported on the social carnage in the Melbourne suburb of Footscray caused by a Needle Distribution Center (NDC). Drug dealers openly trade outside the NDC to the addicts going to collect clean needles (sometimes in bulk quantities of 200, with no questions asked!); the dealers have no fear of arrest, since police are ordered to stay away from the NDC because their presence "discourages" addicts from

patronizing it. The NDC, now in its fourth year of operation, distributes needles by the tens of thousands, and its rate of distribution is rapidly growing: 38,000 last January to 4,273 "clients," and 50,000 in March to 6,754 clients, growth which the NDC reports as a "success."

Meanwhile, local crime has doubled in the past six months, and businesses have reported a 30% collapse in trade. Suburban parents denounce the NDC as a "toxic industry." According to one mother, "Drug use in Footscray has been normalized [in the eyes of children] because of the constant interaction. Eleven to 13 years is now the age of introduction to drugs. The NDC program is futile. It is a ridiculous concept to 'use safely,' because parents know that the child may die with a 'clean' needle in his/her arm." When asked her opinion as to how to reduce the problem, she stated, "Reduce the access to drugs by closing down the NDC; change drug laws to become very severe."

In releasing his committee's final report, Penington announced that he is retiring as its chairman. Even though his plan for shooting galleries had not yet materialized, he gloated that he is "satisfied" with the "changes in public opinion" on drug issues. Certainly, his backers in Australia's establishment are satisfied with him: The major banks, including the National Australia Bank, the ANZ Bank, Westpac Bank, the Commonwealth Bank, and the Reserve Bank of Australia, which fund the major private trust pushing Penington's harm minimization, the Australian Drug Foundation, have doubtless made a fortune from the extra drug money they have been able to launder—up from the \$7 billion the Australian Federal Police say they laundered in 1997—thanks to Penington's expansion of drug consumption.