

Portugal opens MPs' eyes to decriminalising drugs

EXCLUSIVE

GREG BROWN

A conservative government MP who chairs a parliamentary inquiry into crystal methamphetamine has urged Malcolm Turnbull to consider pushing for the decriminalisation of drug possession after travelling to Portugal, where he says a similar policy was working.

Liberal MP Craig Kelly — who travelled to Portugal last week with three MPs — said drug use had declined in the European nation since the country required people caught with small quantities of drugs be sent to a diversion program rather than be charged.

Drug deaths in Portugal have declined from 80 in a million to three in a million since the policy was introduced in 2001, when about 1 per cent of the country was addicted to heroin.

Labor senator Lisa Singh, who attended the five-day trip to Portugal, agreed Australia should consider similar drug policies.

Liberal senator David Bushby and crossbench senator Skye Kakoschke-Moore — who also backed the policy — warned it might not work in Australia.

The parliamentary delegation met with government, police, doctors and drug councillors in Portugal and all departments reported the policy had improved the nation. Drug-related deaths in Portugal were now 29 times lower

Busts thwart huge international import plots

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force arrested 15 men and seized \$360m worth of cocaine. About 500kg of cocaine was seized on the NSW central coast and another 600kg of the drug was seized in Tahiti. An additional 32kg of heroin was found in Fiji destined for the Australian market.

The AFP's international disruption efforts have been hailed as a major success but Australia is still the most attractive market globally for illicit drugs, with an estimated 300,000 ice addicts — the highest per capita in the world.

The federal government, which this year boosted resources to tackle ice use, claimed that a recent wastewater drug monitoring

report suggested ice use was declining.

Mr Lee echoed growing concerns expressed by experts that policing alone might not be able to solve the ice epidemic. "It is not necessarily something we can police our way out of ...

there is no doubt we are the highest user of narcotics per capita in the world ... we are the most attractive market globally for drugs, not just ice, which brings with it a range of different syndicates targeting us," he said. "There is a broader issue of community culture expectations and acceptance of drugs ... we obviously need to change that."

"If you look at some of the ice impact on rural communities and the ability to disrupt the flow of crystal methamphetamine into those communities ... the answer to that is not only targeting the location, it is actually targeting the supply in Southeast Asia, for example."

'It is not

necessarily something we can police our way out of'

SCOTT LEE
AFP ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER

The AFP last month announced a global disruption strategy to combat ice, including enhanced co-operation between Australian agencies and regional partners.

Justice Minister Michael Keenan said the offshore disruption capabilities of the AFP and regional intelligence sharing was critical to shutting off the supply chain of drugs into Australia.

"The AFP's international meth strategy is an important measure for strengthening international engagement, with a focus on disrupting the supply of methamphetamine at its source," Mr Keenan said.

"Taskforce Blaze is a great example of the effectiveness of this international co-operation, with Australian and Chinese authorities stopping 13 tonnes of drugs, including six tonnes of methamphetamine, from reaching our streets."

"Taskforce Storm with the Thailand law-enforcement authorities and Taskforce Dragon with the Cambodians are similarly reaping strong dividends in cutting off the supply of ice before it reaches our shores."

In 2015 former Victorian Police chief commissioner Ken Lay, who was appointed to head the Prime Minister's ice taskforce, said governments could not "arrest their way" out of the drugs scourge. "That's enormously expensive and when you look at some of the most recent seizures on our borders, tonnes and tonnes of precursors ... we're not seeing any lessening of the availability of the drug," he said.

than Australia and the second lowest in Europe.

Mr Kelly said policy changes were needed to arrest Australia's spiralling drug problem, with a record 1808 drug-induced deaths last year. He said Portugal did not have full decriminalisation, noting drugs were still illegal and there were severe punishments for carrying large amounts.

"If Australia had the same

drug-induced death rate as Portugal, we would have had 1735 less deaths in 2016 alone," he said.

"Logic tells you that decriminalising drug use is not conducive and you end up with more problems at the periphery, but actual results in Portugal show that has not occurred."

Mr Kelly acknowledged the policy would put further burden on the health budget.

A spokesman for Justice Minister Michael Keenan said drug decriminalisation was a matter for the states and it was something the Turnbull government would not support. "We would not support a relaxation of Australia's strict drug laws," he said.

Opposition justice spokeswoman Clare O'Neil, who is on the committee undertaking the inquiry, said: "Labor does not sup-

port the decriminalisation of drugs."

The Greens support decriminalising drugs.

Senator Singh said people caught with drugs in Portugal were assessed whether they were addicts or recreational users before being counselled or sent to rehab. "It has shifted the consumption of drugs from a criminal issue to a health issue," she said.

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