How To Save 400 Lives This Year

In 1989, a parliamentary joint committee on the National Crime Authority, after considerable research, announced that the heroin prohibition was not working and that radical alternatives (not including harsher penalties) had to be sought. Nothing of great significance has been done since. In an effort to find out if this inertia is due to a perception on the part of federal politicians that, although they realise the prohibition is a failure, they will lose votes if they talk about decriminalisation, we wrote to all of them asking if they would tell us—on the record and off—how they felt on the issue. Seventy-seven out of 223 replied, and their responses, on and off the record, or in some cases anonymously, were almost identical. Nearly all do indeed want to retain the prohibition.

Decriminalisation of all illegal drugs would save around $1.5 billion a year, which is what the Australian Graduate School of Management’s Robert Marks has estimated the cost of the prohibition to be. This figure includes the costs to society of police, imprisonment and crimes committed to raise money for drugs. Decriminalisation would also save many lives: according to the latest available figures from the federal Department of Human Services and Health, we can expect about 400 young Australians to die this year from heroin overdoses, because they will be unaware of the strength or purity of the heroin they take. Decriminalisation would save most or all of these lives, as government could then regulate to ensure cheap heroin of consistent quality was available to anyone over a certain age who wanted it.

The major problems with decriminalisation are that there would presumably be a slight rise in the number of addicts (although virtually anyone who wants heroin can get it now anyway) and someone would have to tell Lee Kuan Yew and the Americans.

In the light of all this, the continuation of the prohibition (except in the ACT, where heroin is provided to a limited number of addicts) appears irrational and even cruel. Widespread heroin addiction, like AIDS, is a fairly new phenomenon, and deserves the new approaches and changes in attitudes that we have taken with people with AIDS. Homosexuals were traditionally vilified in our society, yet because of AIDS many of them are now treated with a concern and a kindness which heroin addicts can only envy. In recent years, more people have died from heroin than AIDS, even though we know how to stop deaths from heroin. The only government policy to have helped addicts, the expansion of the methadone program, came about because it was seen as useful in the fight against AIDS (by reducing the number of people sharing needles).

Decriminalising heroin would be humane, cheap, courageous and effective. It is the sort of action that fits in with the scepticism and sense of practicality on which Australians pride themselves, and would do more to improve our sense of ourselves and, ultimately, to attract the admiration of the world, than the Olympic Games or any amount of blather about the republic. Because of the lives involved, it is by any standard a far more valuable goal.