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## Cannabis use decriminalised while Police seize dealers' assets

New asset recovery legislation coming into action today will see Police able to seize unexplained income and assets from drug dealers far more easily, but at the same time a new Police policy of formal warnings for so called minor offences is tantamount to decriminalising possession and use of cannabis according to former Police detective and MethCon Group director Mike Sabin.

“The asset recovery legislation is long over due” stated Mr. Sabin and “with Police able to seize assets under a civil standard of proof, Police will make great inroads into the ill-gotten gains of organised crime that yield multiple billions of dollars from the methamphetamine and cannabis trade in New Zealand.”

This strategy was one of a number of recommendations made to the new National led government by Mr. Sabin, “the thrust of the strategy being to seize finances and assets of dealers and re-invest these funds, via the crown account, into prevention and treatment aimed at driving down demand for the very drugs the criminals profited from.”

“Unfortunately, while the Police will be making the most of this new legislation, at the same time they are effectively waiving a white flag to the customers whose demand supports drug dealers, with a trial of a new policy of warnings for minor offences being widened across Auckland and likely to go nation-wide” said Mr. Sabin.

Following a three month pilot on the North Shore in Auckland, Police have announced that they have extended the trial for six months across wider Auckland and will see Police under new ‘formal guidelines’ issuing warnings at their discretion for offences with maximum penalties of 2 years imprisonment or less, including shoplifting, possession of knives, common assault and possession of cannabis.

“Police hierarchy justify what they say is a ‘common sense approach’, by claiming these offences ‘would not get significant sentences anyway’, which not only flies in the face of their own ‘Broken Windows’, New York style policing policies of the late 90s, but sends a clear message to the community that it is very unlikely that using cannabis and possession of smaller amounts of the drug, will attract anything other than a warning” claimed Mr. Sabin.

“In essence, this signals decriminalisation of what many would argue is the foundation blocks of our nation’s drug problems and resulting harm to the community. To give up on so called ‘minor’ offences is like a fat man letting his belt out to solve his obesity problem; nothing more than a quick fix to the symptoms of a significant underlying problem” said Mr. Sabin.

Super Mayoralty candidates Len Brown and John Banks have signalled their support for the scheme but according to Mr. Sabin “they seem to be missing obvious points regarding their call to maintain a ‘zero-tolerance’ mantra, in that an endless stream of warnings to offenders, none of which attract any real accountability is hardly likely to deliver any sort of deterrence. To the contrary in fact I believe it sends clear signals that Police see pursuing these sort of minor offences as ‘pointless’, something already stated by frontline officers to some media” claimed Mr. Sabin.

While the new approach currently involves arresting offenders for these type of offences and then issuing them with a warning before releasing them without charge, Mr. Sabin believes the natural progression from this, by and already stretched police force, will be to simply give a warning on the street rather than wasting time taking them back to the station for what amounts to nothing but further demands on Police resources.

“If we have learnt anything from effective Policing models around the world in recent times it’s that deterrence is only effective where there is swiftness and certainty. In other words there is a high possibility of being detected and there is certainty about consequences to the indiscretion” said Mr. Sabin.

This is the essence of the successful New York policing model, also known as the Broken Windows approach and has seen significant reductions in not only minor offending but also serious offences. “Quite simply, studies have shown that when you turn a blind eye to minor offences it creates a breeding ground for other criminal offending to grow. Before you know it, you don’t worry about the ‘broken windows’ because they’re all broken and you are too busy trying to keep up with the serious offending that has spawned from the fertile atmosphere created by ignoring the small stuff”, claimed Mr. Sabin.

“It follows then, that to prevent more serious crime you must focus on the minor, seemingly disconnected crime such as wilful damage, petty theft and use of illicit drugs, something we are now doing the complete opposite of” said Mr. Sabin.

“There is a sad irony in the contrast in legislation, Police policy and government strategy” said Mr. Sabin. “On the one hand we are striving to strip assets from the drug peddlers, while on the other we are fostering demand for the drugs by removing deterrence and consequences to use and following harm minimisation philosophies which focus on so called ‘safer use’ at the expense of prevention and abstinence.”

“As the highest per capita users in the world of cannabis and methamphetamine, I would argue we are already reaping what we have sown with our nonsensical policies centred on minimising harm to drug users at the expense of the wider harm to the community. In 10 years the Police have gone from a proactive organisation bent of high deterrence to minor offences via New York style policing, to largely condoning that very behaviour through warnings which deliver no consequences” said Mr. Sabin.

“We are ignoring the elephant in the room yet again, with short sighted, stop-gap policies and what worries me is that we are also ignoring very good examples of the

way in which social contagions compound on themselves and drug supply is incentivised” said Mr. Sabin.

“Essentially the new asset recovery legislation is aimed at ‘putting out the fire’, but at the other end the Police are looking to use gasoline to douse the flames, which is likely to lead to further deterioration of the problems.”