

DRUG USE AND CRIME

Grievance

MR R.A. AINSWORTH (Roe) [9.41 am]: My grievance is directed to the Minister for Health and relates to the State's escalating drug problems and the links between drugs and crime. In one sense, it is a pity that I could not have a joint grievance with the Ministers for Health and Police.

Mr R.C. Kucera: I trust that was not a pun.

Mr R.A. AINSWORTH: It was not intentional.

This Government purports to have a strong focus on providing quality health care and a safer community for all Western Australians. However, from the perspective of regional Western Australians in particular, the evidence is mounting that the Government is failing. Two years ago the Government promised the community that it would get tough on crime and would implement better drug strategies. Its primary drug strategy turned out to be the decriminalisation of cannabis, despite its assertions that it must act to break the cycle of drug abuse and crime, which is wreaking much devastation on the community.

Labor promised more support for drug and alcohol counselling and community health services for women and men in the regions. Most recently, during the budget process Labor promised to implement a number of drug strategies to reduce the likelihood of drug users returning to crime to feed their drug habits, reduce the demand for drugs and reduce the harm associated with drug use. I would like to know what these drug strategies are.

Currently, the Government has turned its back on the youth of regional Western Australia. It is sending a very mixed message to the youth of this State about what is right and wrong, particularly with regard to cannabis. The social fabric of this State is being eroded because of the Government's ill-conceived and often conflicting social policies and failure to provide leadership to our youth. The Government seems to have chosen to ignore the research, surveys and evidence of escalating drug and crime problems in this State.

A recent report on drug use in Western Australia has triggered my grievance today. The statistics in that report are scary, particularly from a regional perspective, because it not only highlights that illicit drug use in Western Australia is above the national average but also that the usage in regional areas is above the state average. In other words, regional Western Australia has the biggest number of people involved in illicit drugs in the whole country. An article in *The West Australian* today highlights that. The article is associated with the report I just mentioned and warns that Western Australia must develop responses to drug crimes that are unique to the State's growing addiction to amphetamines. The trend of drug use in Western Australia is different from that in other parts of the country and probably other parts of the world. The chosen hard drug for many Western Australians is not heroin but amphetamines, particularly in Kalgoorlie, which rated a special mention in the article.

I refer to drug use in West Australia compared with the national average. More than half of Western Australia's children and adults have used an illicit drug, which I find very disturbing. Even if cannabis is excluded from the statistics - which the minister sometimes excludes - 16.1 per cent of Western Australians have used other illicit drugs. The rate of recent drug use in Western Australia is higher than the national average. The rate of any illicit drug use in Western Australia compared with Australia is 22 per cent and 16.9 per cent respectively, for cannabis it is 17.5 per cent compared with 12.9 per cent, and for any illicit drug excluding cannabis the rate is 3.9 per cent compared with 3.5 per cent. In 1999, four out of every 10 Western Australian students aged between 12 and 17 years had used cannabis at some stage, a third had used it in the past year and one in five had used it in the past month. I find those figures extremely disturbing. The report also stated that rural students were more likely than metropolitan students to have used cannabis. Just over half of rural students compared with just over a third of metropolitan students had used cannabis. Nearly four out of 10 rural students compared with just three out of 10 metropolitan students had used cannabis in the past year. I am aware that the minister thinks that the statistics for 2002 will be better. I hope for everyone's sake they are because those statistics I have read out are deeply disturbing.

I am interested to know what the minister intends to do now that this problem has been clearly identified in the report I just mentioned. The unfortunately high statistics I have mentioned couple very closely with the abnormally high rates of crime, from which this State also suffers. Western Australia has the dubious honour of having the highest rate of illicit drug use in the nation, coupled with some of the highest rates of crime. The two are closely linked. A report prepared by the crime prevention branch of the federal Attorney-General's Department states that armed and unarmed robbery are the fastest growing crimes. Along with burglary, they are the crimes most closely associated with drug addiction. Clearly, there is a direct correlation between at least a large portion of Western Australia's crime rate and the excessive use of illicit drugs, which I have outlined.

As further evidence of the link between drugs and crime, the "Australian Crime: facts and figures 2002" report by the Australian Institute of Criminology shows that it was routine for about 70 per cent of adult male detainees

to test positive for any drug in 1999-2001. That is a very clear indication that drugs and crime go hand in hand. The Labor Party's pre-election policy recognised this. A Labor Party policy statement recognised that in order to address the spiralling crime problem, the Labor Party needed to break the cycle between drugs, particularly illicit drugs such as heroin and amphetamines, and crime. Some other statements in the Labor Party policy indicated a similar understanding.

At this stage, the Government's policy on these matters appears to be in conflict. The Government has moved in this place to decriminalise cannabis. It has ignored the evidence that, more often than not, the use of cannabis leads to the abuse of other illicit drugs. Country areas need resources for drug teams. All those matters need urgent attention.

In conclusion - I have more things I would like to say - on a positive note, I thank the Minister for Health for his forthright response this week to the member for Wagin's question on drug-related services in regional Western Australia. We look forward to a response on a broader drug and crime related policy that will help Western Australia, particularly people in the regions.

MR R.C. KUCERA (Yokine - Minister for Health) [9.47 am]: I thank the member for his grievance. It gives me an opportunity to highlight some of the issues that obviously concern us all. Two nights ago I spoke at a local Catholic school in my area. For the first time I was able to explain to those who attended what our policies on cannabis are. After I had finished that explanation, which I gave in the House when I presented the paper, the people from the school were clear that our policy was the correct way to go and that the previous policies had indeed failed. There is no doubt about that. The levels of drug use that the member for Roe referred to show that there is no doubt that the previous policies did not work. I am not being critical of the Opposition when I say that; I am simply stating a fact. It is nonsense for Governments to put their heads in the sand and say that drug use will go away or to tell our kids to just say no to drugs. That will always be nonsense.

As I said yesterday to the member for Wagin, this Government has approached drug issues from an evidence-based point of view; it has not just dealt with anecdotes. This Government has probably set the pattern for not only this State, but also Australia. Producing a report like this takes a degree of courage on the part of the Government. When I first raised it with the Premier and in cabinet, I made it clear that there would be some hooks involved in doing this kind of thing. The issues came out of the Community Drug Summit. We have stuck slavishly to the direction that the Drug Summit gave us last year. We listened to the hundred-odd people who came to Parliament, and we listened to the thousand-odd people who either spoke to the Parliament or who wrote submissions. I have said repeatedly that the Government listened to people from both ends of the spectrum. As a result, the issues that came out of the summit indicated that Governments had to be accountable and transparent when it came to the issue of drugs. I believe the member for Roe will agree, as did the member for Wagin yesterday, that, as a first go, this is quite a remarkable document. The concerns of the member for Roe, and those expressed by the member for Wagin yesterday, are quite correct. The indication that, by percentage of population, the use of drugs in rural areas, in particular, is higher than that in the metropolitan area is of great concern to the Government. The major concern is the reasons behind that.

Repeatedly in this Chamber during the Drug Summit we heard young people and their parents say why they got into drug use. It came back to the fundamental platform and plank on which this Government has based itself; that is, a good education and decent community capacity whereby parents can connect with their children; good education programs in schools that allow the schools to connect with the parents of students; an opportunity, and indeed a hope, that a child will get a job when he or she leaves school; and, as the member for Roe said, good health services, so that those people who get sucked into the vortex of drug use have some support. The report identifies quite clearly that there is a need to put more effort into drug education in rural areas, and there is a much greater need to bolster and support the drug units and the drug programs in rural areas; there is no doubt about that.

I will quickly refer to some of the principles that came out of the Drug Summit and the practices that Governments should follow. The Government will put people and their needs at the centre of its planning and responses; in other words, people will be put first. We have been doing that consistently right across government. The Government will put people's lives before political ideology. There is no doubt that many members on the other side of the House do not support the Leader of the Opposition's views on this issue. In this House they may say that they support him, but, as parents, I doubt that they support the views that were put - all the nonsense in the debate about kids in their pyjamas reaching out and plucking the plants from their gardens. The reality is contained in this report. Drug use is with us now and is a problem across the State. Putting our heads in the sand and hoping it will go away will never work.

In terms of ideology, we must move on. However, what was said in the Drug Summit simply reiterates what the member for Roe said this morning. The Government will provide the necessary support to assist all Western Australians to fully participate in our community. For the very first time, because of the excellent work that is being done under the leadership of Denzil McCotter and the team from the Drug and Alcohol Office, and people

like Steve Allsop, who was sitting alongside me in the House during the debate, there is a clear picture of what is happening in rural areas. In your seat, Mr Speaker, the statistics for the Pilbara are disturbing, particularly drug usage by people who are using heavy machinery.

Another issue is that the statistics clearly show that drug use among young people in some areas is declining. However, it is disturbing that it is not declining among the 25 to 40-year-old age group; in fact, it is fairly consistent. That is of concern, because those people are the current crop of parents - those who are instructing young people about their future. That is of great concern to me. Again, that highlights what needs to be done in that area.

What has the Government been doing in that area, and what has it been working towards? Since the Drug Summit, the Government has implemented almost all its recommendations, or at least made a start on the key initiatives that arose from those recommendations. An amount of \$10 million has been allocated to the family strength program over the next four years - not just for health services, but across the whole spectrum of government, so that we are building jobs and ensuring that kids stay at school and have a hope of moving on. The Government now has an education platform that for the first time in almost a decade has turned around the retention rates in schools. We now have a health system that for the first time is listening to what people in Esperance say. In the next month or so the Government will put in place the community programs to allow that to happen, so that people can tell us what they need.

I thank the members for Roe and Wagin for raising these issues. Despite the criticism of the Government's policies by those members and their party, at least they take a positive view and realise that they must work together with their community. As I said yesterday, this is above politics. This is the first opportunity that I have had to look closely at this report. I am more than willing to work with local members to make sure the Government can support them, following the evidence that this report has brought forward. I thank the member for Roe for his grievance.