

TRAINING SEMINAR ON DRUGS

CANBERRA, A. C. T

7 SEPTEMBER 1970

Speech by the Prime Minister, Mr. John Gorton

Mr. Minister, Your Excellencies, Commonwealth and State Ministers, Officers of the Crown, Federal and State, and our Visitors from Overseas:

Thank you, Mr. Minister, for the introduction. This Seminar, in one way, is a function that one can scarcely be pleased to open, because it is not pleasing that there should be a need for a Seminar to prevent the abuse of drugs. Yet, in another way, because there is that need, and because it is paramount, it is pleasing indeed to see the effort that is being made, of which this Seminar is a part, to combat one of the greatest menaces of our time.

I welcome experts from the United States Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs who will assist with the technical lectures, and I welcome the representatives of the Overseas Narcotics Bureau in South East Asia. To that I add a very warm welcome to the students on the course - that is the drug enforcement officers from within and from without Australia.

The task before us all is a truly international one. Our object is to impede and, where we can, to eliminate illicit drug traffic and drug abuse. I believe this Seminar will be a major contribution to that end. It is the first centralised course of its kind in Australia and it is being presented by the Commonwealth Bureau of Narcotics in conjunction with the Training Centre of the Department of Customs and Excise.

In a very real sense, the task before all of you here is the task of protection - of protecting individual citizens from the madness and death which they can inflict upon themselves by drug abuse, and of protecting the community against the crimes to which such addicts can be driven, should the supply of their narcotics be cut off.

It is distressing to find that in Australia, where we have so much going for us, the habit of drug-taking is increasing, as it is increasing amongst our neighbours in South-East Asia. And it is distressing to find that the sources of supply are so numerous.

It would be easy for us to say "This is a problem for the countries where the drugs are produced. Let us stop the menace at its source." But it isn't as simple as that. For one thing, we don't control the activities of the countries which are the sources of these narcotics. And though destruction at the source of supply is the ideal and absolute way of killing this vice, if we cannot do it, there are at least two other points at which successful attacks can be launched.

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There are the supply routes, which are world wide, and there are the markets at the end of those supply routes, of which Australia is one. Because the supply routes are spread throughout the world and more than one country the markets at the end of those supply routes, it is because of that that this is such an international problem and that is why this Seminar is so international in character.

How well you succeed in the objects you have that this Seminar is designed to further will be, I believe, a factor in the standard of our societies for generations to come. And what is happening in our own country, Australia, today?

The truth is that drug abuse is increasing. The smugglers are getting more numerous and more cunning. There are more pushers at work and they are finding more customers among our young people. This must be stopped and we must marshal all the skills we have to stop it.

The warnings from other countries which have suffered the problem longer are quite loud and clear. The drug trail is the downhill trail to crime, to despair, to poverty, to madness and to death.

Not many years ago the worst drug evil we had in Australia was a bit of opium-smoking and a few opium dens in the back streets of our big cities, and this was a problem of quite manageable proportions. But now it's hashish, marijuana, LSD - harder narcotics - and more and more young people are "taking trips" and getting "hooked" and more and more "pads" are to be found in areas of our cities. The doctors, the hospitals, the psychiatrists and the social workers, all know what the Customs and the police and the courts know - that this illicit traffic and these dangerous habits are getting worse, and that one of the greatest tasks before us is to stop it all as soon and as completely as we can.

It isn't easy to quote actual figures on the growth of drug abuse, but in the last eighteen months, seizures of illegal drugs have increased by 300 per cent and in the last three months drugs to the value of a quarter of a million dollars have been intercepted. They came from half a dozen countries in Asia, from the United States and from South Africa.

In 1968, 152 young people between 14 and 19 years of age were charged with drug offences and a further 139 between the ages of 20 and 34. Well, you may say that isn't many, but there are many who do not get caught and there is the unhappy fact that the numbers are growing with frightening speed.

For in 1969, not 152 but 284 youngsters between 14 and 19 were charged, and not 139 between the ages of 20 and 34 were charged but 424 in that age group, which is a two and a half fold increase in one year.

The drugs are coming through all sorts of channels from external sources; some are smuggled into Australia in false compartments of suitcases and bags, some in household appliances such as food mixers and stereo speakers and bongo drums and so on. But you know this better than I do. And yet others come by mail or are thrown overboard from ships in our ports.

Well, we are developing our own responses to these practices and our counter-measures are having some success. The strength of our Narcotics Squad has been trebled since it was first formed and it is proposed to increase the numbers again in the near future.

But perhaps I can sum up our task by giving you five points to which the Australian public should direct their minds.

First the drug traffic and drug abuse in Australia have grown at an alarming rate of geometric progression in the past few years.

Second, there has been an alarming increase in the number of new addicts in the younger age groups.

Third, there are about 5,000 recorded narcotic offenders in Australia. Marijuana is the most abused drug and in the last three years the quantity smuggled has increased dramatically.

Fourth, most of the drug traffic is in the larger cities, though I understand there is evidence that preparations are being made in the smaller Australian cities to extend this traffic.

And, fifth, there is some production and manufacture of marijuana and LSD going on in Australia.

These points give you some idea of the problem here. This course beginning today will, I hope, be a powerful reinforcement for a continuing attack on the problem. The course itself came into being because for some time Commonwealth and State Ministers concerned with health and law enforcement had been discussing the increase of drug abuse in Australia. They set up a National Standing Control Committee and set it to work to study this problem.

That Committee recommended a specialised central training course for officers engaged in the suppression of illicit drug traffic. The Ministers decided to have that course, and my colleague, Mr. Chipp, offered the services of his Department to run it.

Those of you who are here to attend that course are directly involved in the attack on the traffic. You can be assured that the Governments and people of Australia are completely behind you in your work.

For in Australia it has been continually emphasised that where there has been a co-ordinated and co-operative effort by the various agencies - here, and in Asia, and elsewhere - this has had a marked effect on the drug traffic. I think this course will be a good example of the kind of co-operation which will lead to that effect.

It will be up to you to interrupt the sources of supply. It will be up to you to apprehend the pushers and the addicts. It will be up to the courts to see that those who peddle these powders of death receive proper sentences so that they, the courts, can join in the protection which you are giving to the public of Australia.

Now one final point. We recognise that the problem extends beyond individual countries. No one country can hope to combat the problem in isolation. Therefore, the question of co-operation and liaison, with Asian countries in particular, becomes essential to our growing efforts to cut down the illicit entry of drugs.

Some activity has already taken place with that object in view, but my Government has now decided that it will take the initiative in setting up a more formal international arrangement between the operational bodies responsible for anti-narcotic control. . . . between ourselves, New Zealand, and our Asian friends.

The Government will begin discussions on this matter with Governments in the South-East Asian area as soon as practicable. Preliminary talks have already taken place on this matter between the Minister for Customs and Excise and Ministers in other countries and these talks indicate that there will be a large measure of support for this co-operative international action.

And Ministers agree that irrespective of a country's borders, the operational bodies must work together to cut off supply routes, and if possible, the sources of supply and to pass on information through an international network so that against an international conspiracy, there can be an international defence.

Given this more formal arrangement, and given the enthusiasm which I believe you will bring to this work, I think that we will have taken another big stride forward in really getting to grips with this dangerous and growing problem.

Now, Mr. Minister, I declare this Seminar open.

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