

# **Transcript of Interview with Virginia Trioli**

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**VIRGINIA TRIOLI:** Dr Alex Wodak is the Director of Drug and Alcohol Services at St Vincent Hospital at Darlinghurst, and a leader in this field and someone who is very well respected on the issue. Alex Wodak, good morning.

**DR ALEX WODAK:** Good morning.

**VT:** Do you think the Greens are on the right track here with their policy?

**AW:** Yes, I do. Yes I do and I think that quote from Justice Don Stewart is very telling. Here is another commentator on the same problem. Who would believe that a democratic government would pursue for eight decades a failed policy that produced tens of millions of victims, millions of dollars of illicit profits to drug dealers, cost tax-payers hundreds of millions of dollars, increase crime, destroyed inner cities, caused widespread corruption and violations of human rights, and all with no success in achieving the stated unattainable objective of drug-free America. Now that was Nobel laureate Milton Friedman. You know there are quotes like this from the highest of the high, in our communities, people who are held in the greatest of repute and the plain fact is that, whether we like it or not, the 'war against drugs' approach has failed, and it has failed miserably. We have to remember that 'Ice' has emerged at a time when Australia is supposed to be fighting a war against drugs and this is consistent with the iron law of Prohibition, and that is that the more jealously, the more stringently that law Enforcement Authorities pursue illicit drugs, the more likely it is that more dangerous drugs replace dangerous drugs.

**VT:** Alex Wodak, you argue that the advent of 'Ice', and the prevalence of the use of that terrible drug, is the result of a climate of prohibition?

**AW:** Indeed, and I will give as an example of other examples of that, the disappearance of beer and its replacement by wine and spirits during alcohol Prohibition in the United States, 1920 to 1933.

**VT:** But we're surely living in very different times, now?

**AW:** There are many examples I could give you around the world where this has happened: the Prohibition of opium smoking in Asia resulted in the replacement of opium smoking by heroine injecting, which was dramatically much worse and more serious than opium smoking.

**VT:** But don't you necessarily create, if not a greater interest in it, then more use of illegal drugs if you follow the Greens policy of removing criminal sanctions for personal drug use and the possession or sale of the associated implements. Don't you go down a path of liberalisation that is potentially dangerous, too?

**AW:** Well we have to separate what we might think intuitively, which is what you're suggesting we should do, with actually looking at the evidence, and I would argue that the evidence points in an opposite direction from where your intuition is leading you. And the evidence is, world wide,

that the 'war against drugs' has been wrapped up for decades, and during that period drug use has been reported from more and more countries, in a more and more serious way, with more and more serious complications, at a time when we throw more and more money at drug law enforcement and ramp up the rhetoric.

**VT:** Well let's check the theory, then. Do we have any examples of countries where those criminal sanctions have been removed, as the greens are calling for, and the situation has improved?

**AW:** We've got examples, exactly as that, where authorities have switched from a drug law enforcement approach to a harm minimisation approach – which includes drug law reform – and where benefits have flowed. And a good example is Switzerland. I was present in 1997 when the President of Switzerland thanked the International Harm Reduction Movement for the recommendations that we had made to Switzerland because they had found that after ramping up drug law enforcement and a 'war-against-drugs' approach, things had got worse and worse and worse, and finally they had taken our advice, and they had expanded methadone programmes, and put equal amounts of money into health and social interventions as they put into drug law enforcement, and things have turned around, and drug use had decreased.

**VT:** So that's the direction we should be going in?

**AW:** That's exactly the direction we should be going in.

**VT:** We spoke off-air this morning to the Chief Executive Officer Donna Bull from the Alcohol and Other Drugs Council of Australia, Alex Wodak, and she told us that of course there's a diversity of opinion on this, but she says the organisation says decriminalising drugs like 'ice' is worth considering, but they find they can't necessarily support it. Do you understand why that organisation may have that view?

**AW:** Well when you look at the evidence, and that's what I always go back to, the evidence is that....

**VT:** .... I think that they're working from evidence too....

**AW:** Well I think that the evidence clearly shows that drug law enforcement – customs, police, courts and prisons – are formidably expensive, have very modest benefits and have very serious counter-productive effects including wide spread police corruption, which Justice Don Stewart also spoke about, as a direct result of relying so heavily on drug law enforcement. We have to have drug law enforcement, we'll never get away from that, and we should always keep that as one of the things we do. The whole problem that we have got is that we've got an unbalanced approach. We should be recognising that this is, first and foremost, a health and social problem.

**VT:** Alex Wodak, thanks for joining us today.

**AW:** Pleasure.

**VT:** Alex Wodak, Director of Drug and Alcohol Services at St Vincent's Hospital at Darlinghurst. Lee Rhiannon, just a final question for you. You have no regrets, then, at what this might cost the Greens at the forthcoming State Elections?

**LEE RHIANNON:** Look, it's not about 'costing' the Greens – our policies are determined in what is best for society.....

**VT:** Well, let's be blunt here. You're a political party; you're out there at election time to try and get votes, yes?

**LR:** Yes of course we are!

**VT:** Otherwise there's no point in being around!

**LR:** Yes, but Virginia, we could say that we support wood chipping; we support the burning of coal.....

**VT:** Well, you could if you believed in it, yes.

**LR:** Yes exactly, and we could say that we believe that everybody should be locked up for drugs, but we don't. And we have come to those policies after considerable discussion internally in our party and advice from outside. What I would like to see – what we need – is a debate on how we manage these issues and that's where I would hope that you would get Mr Iemma and Mr Debnam on, and question them about their own policies on this issue. It is costing lives!

**VT:** Lee Rhiannon, thank you.

**LR:** Thank you

**VT:** Lee Rhiannon is the leader of the NSW Greens and member of the Legislative Council.