

How much is that doggie in the window?

The use of sniffer dogs in public spaces breaches people's civil liberty, may be illegal and is likely to cause more harm than good. There are things that people can do to object to these practices but until these police practices are changed then all of us in society will pay the price.

It is estimated that the NSW taxpayer is paying up to \$90,000 for each of the up to 30 sniffer dogs currently operating in NSW. The people of NSW are paying a price even higher than the \$2.7 million dog tag as there are significant other costs and significant negative impacts.

The sniffer dogs do not go out alone. At a recent raid on the Exchange hotel half of Oxford Street was blocked, many vehicles and dozens of police were involved. This exercise must have cost a small fortune in overtime, its costs were even greater in the sacrifice of justice. How many hours did the police take to respond to domestic violence calls that night?

The loss of freedom of movement has been one of the first casualties. No one in NSW should feel that they can't safely go out on the streets or public transport without being searched without their consent.

The loss of freedom of activity is another great sacrifice that NSW Citizens and visiting tourists are making. People should feel that they can sit in a bar without that venue being surrounded by police and their liberty removed until the police have finished their dog business.

The outcome of the raid on the Exchange hotel was around 500 people detained for an extended period resulting in nine arrests for personal possession or small quantities of illegal drugs. These people will join the 1,584 that were charged from the beginning of the year till the end of May, they will cost more time and money in police, prosecutors, courts and perhaps prisons.

Our Liberties are being ripped off in other ways. The police are acting unlawfully. It is unlawful to search people without reasonable grounds and is unlawful to deprive people of their liberty. Furthermore the use of a sniffer dog by someone pretending to be blind is deceptive and could hardly be thought of as the last great undercover genius of disguise. A Random Breath Testing site which has been used to provide sniffer dogs the opportunity to search cars may also constitute stopping people under false pretences. Public servants are still public servants even if they wear police uniforms, have a dog on a leash and carry a big stick!

So what happens in a crackdown of this sort? There is no evidence that less drugs are consumed or that fewer people use drugs as the result of these expensive operations. It is more likely that these police practices will lead people to use all their drugs before they leave home or as soon as they purchase them.

Under this draconian pressure people are more likely to dispose of syringes inappropriately, they will be at higher risk of overdose and less likely to approach harm reduction services for fear that they are being targeted.

Drug activity in one area is likely to spill out to surrounding areas if heightened police activity focuses on a particular street, area or scene. It could move from say, Oxford Street Darlinghurst, to say, Paddington, Bronte, Bellevue Hill or Woollahra.

The police have not been keen to justify their practices and the Minister for police, the police media unit and the NSW Premier's Office have given answers which are confusing. When asked in parliament about the number of sniffer dogs by Lee Rhiannon, the Greens member in the upper house, a spokesperson for the Police Minister said there were four (4) dogs. A month later the premier's office in their material following up 12 months since the NSW drugs summit released information claiming that there were 20. The police media unit boasted early this year that there were 30 sniffer dogs in NSW.

In answer to further questions from the Greens, the Minister's spokesperson said that the dogs could detect cannabis and amphetamines. In answer to what drugs had been found by sniffer dogs the answer from the Minister's lacky was Cannabis, amphetamine, heroin and cocaine. In the premier's departments material it was said that the dogs were "highly trained".

To help address these issues it is important that people let their complaints be heard. These can be through the Redfern Legal Centre, the NSW Council for Civil Liberties or the NSW Ombudsman.

If people wish to bring complaints that they feel they have been inappropriately treated by police, that they have been unlawfully detained or that they have been searched without there being reasonable grounds they can contact Redfern Legal Centre on 9698 7277, www.rlc.org.au or the Council for Civil Liberties on www.nswccl.org.au

Also let people know, phone talk back radio, write letters to the editor, write to your local member of parliament, join RLC and CCL in calling for change to these practices. If you see sniffer dogs in the street, video tape their activities. And if you hear through your friendly street press of activities to highlight the injustice and community targeting of the Sniffer Dogs issue, join us!

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