



AUTHOR: Dr Keith Suter
Global Thought Leader
Real Insights & Authority



BREAKING THE TABOO: SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE FILM PREMIERE AND DISCUSSION SESSION

Breaking The Taboo June 2013 premiere and subsequent discussion was a remarkable evening. The film was challenging in itself and the subsequent discussion also covered many interesting points.

Here are four general reflections.

First, the film argues that the “war on drugs” has failed. This it does convincingly.

Unfortunately, US President Nixon in launching the “war” four decades ago never explained what a “victory” would look like. How would we know when we had had “won”?

To continue the military analogy, the “war” is just like the inconclusive trench warfare in World War I which created a stalemate. In the Australian context, for example, the “war” costs over a \$1billion per year and shows no signs of ending.

Second, film also shows that some key political and business figures are arguing for a change. The film is not just one long litany of what has gone wrong – there are some leading figures calling for a change and giving some hope.

Change on any issue begins with people recognizing that the current situation is wrong. The Global Commission on Drug Policy is setting a courageous example and stimulating some new thinking.

Third it is interesting how the Global Commission’s work is coinciding with many individual initiatives which are also challenging the underlying “war” mentality.

When the people lead, the leaders will eventually follow. In the US, for example, while the Obama White House maintains largely the same policy since the Nixon era, 18 states and the District of Columbia have legalised the use of marijuana for medical purposes since California voters made the first move in 1996. The US experience also shows the broad coalition of people wanting change, including some members of the police force (LEAP: Law Enforcement Against Prohibition).

www.TheGlobalFactor.com.au Keith@KeithSuter.com.au

www.Global-Directions.com Keith@KeithSuter.com.au

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Finally, I think that there now two main tasks to be carried out. First, “decriminalizing” narcotics is not enough, in other words, simply changing laws to permit, for example, a limited quantity for personal use. This is just tinkering around the edges.

If we are to treat drug addiction as more of a “health” issue than a “criminal” one, then there needs to be a vision of what substances should be made available, under what conditions, with what government regulation, with what taxation regimes etc – much as we see with alcohol. As with alcohol, there will also need to be the safety net of medical and other treatment facilities for people who consume too much.

There will also still need to be a role for law enforcement because whenever a new endeavour is undertaken (such as the Internet) so criminal elements automatically seek to get involved (such as Internet scams). Criminal elements will still try to get involved in whatever new arrangements are made for the handling of narcotics.

The other task is to have a good communications policy. “Facts” alone do not change public opinion or public policy. The “war on drugs” has become so embedded within the everyday thinking of most people that they will not change their minds easily.

It is necessary to show not only that the “war on drugs” approach has failed but also that there are some “alternatives to war”.

The Melbourne film premiere and subsequent discussion session was a good move in that direction.