



THE NIMBIN GOODTIMES

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Roadblocks confirm drug war continues

by David Shoebridge, Greens NSW MLA

On MardiGrass weekend, people came to Nimbin from around the world to celebrate the region's vibrant culture and call for the legalisation of cannabis. They were met with a warm-hearted community and a literal wall of police.

What we saw at MardiGrass was a peaceful town under siege from the NSW Police, and it was an ugly sight. Every road leading to Nimbin had squads of police staffing roadside drug testing units that were testing drivers for the smallest possible detectable quantity of cannabis in their saliva.

This wasn't a road safety campaign, it was an aggressive ideological war against cannabis, dressed up as an effort to keep our roads safe.

The political direction for all this didn't come from the local Inspector, who worked in a commonsense and decent way with the MardiGrass organisers. It came from Police Commissioner Andrew Scipione and his intolerant political playmates, Police Minister Troy Grant and Premier Mike Baird.

The Greens have had serious concerns about the operation of this program for some time, and have been forced to use the Government FOI scheme to get further information about its operation. What we have discovered is alarming. Not only does the scheme only test for three illegal drugs, notably ignoring cocaine – the banker's drug of choice – it also doesn't test for any of the prescriptions drugs that are known to impair driving.

The testing looks only for the 'presence' of drugs, meaning drivers are charged who are in no way impaired from drugs. Across NSW, people are losing their licences for driving days, and even weeks, after smoking a joint.

The most recent police data obtained by the Greens through freedom of information shows an enormous increase in the proportion of positive results as a result of roadside drug tests. The rate of initial positive results to tests has gone from 2% of drivers tested in 2012, to a whopping 16% in 2015. No-one is suggesting that we have had an eight-fold increase in drug driving in the past four years, so the question needs to be asked, why has the proportion of positive results increased so dramatically?

The enormous spike in those testing positive can't be explained by better or more targeted policing, although harassment of drivers around Nimbin and other areas may be a contributing factor. The most likely reason is that the police have enormously increased the sensitivity of the testing, to catch people with even smaller trace elements of chemicals in their system.

This new data goes some way to explaining why people are testing positive days or weeks after consuming cannabis. People are now routinely losing their licence, not because they are impaired by drugs, but because a minuscule quantity is detected by the new police tests.

It's clear that as the number of tests increase, we're going to have even more people testing positive for tiny traces of drugs that are in no way impairing their driving ability.

The Greens firmly believe that anyone who is impaired by drugs should never drive, and should face serious consequence if caught behind the wheel of a vehicle. But the police aren't testing for impairment, they test for the mere presence of just three illegal drugs.

With the ramping up of the numbers being tested, with 100,000 a year planned, this unfair and poorly targeted program will likely catch thousands more responsible and unimpaired drivers.



Thousands turned out for this year's MardiGrass parade. See our centrespread for more photos

Photo: Garry Mimlich



Photo: Marion Goffin

Fighting a losing battle. The police team lose another 'tug of peace' to the polite team. Officers conducted 1366 random drug tests and 1777 random breath tests during the three-day operation, catching only 45 people for drug-driving and infringing four drivers for drink-driving.



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