



*20<sup>th</sup> of August, 2021*

Hi there,

It's a while since you've heard from me, but there's been plenty happening in the State Parliament and the wider world. Here's an update from me.



## Sex Work to be Decriminalised!

After pursuing this fair, decent and fundamental reform for years, I was appointed in 2019 by the Government to lead an inquiry into laws governing sex work in Victoria, and to find the best way of decriminalising sex work in Victoria.

Last week we delivered. The Government's announcement that it will implement my recommendation to decriminalise sex work as legitimate employment will protect these workers and reduce the stigma and discrimination they have for so long endured.

These changes flow from the report:

- removing offences and criminal penalties for consensual sex work;
- repealing public health offences;
- repealing the Sex Work Act 1994 to instead regulate sex work through existing government agencies and business regulation;
- modernising planning, public health and anti-discrimination laws to support a decriminalised system.

This is a case of making the world better by removing a discriminatory law, not imposing a new law. It simply extends to all sex workers the occupational health and safety, welfare and taxation coverage of any other employee.

It is based in large part on listening to sex workers, as well as legal and public policy experts. The collective view of all the sex worker groups was that decriminalising the industry was by far the best way to give them the best occupational health and safety outcomes. These changes will allow them to make a true profession out of their work - to pay tax, demand better conditions and be more open with their friends and family about what they do. It's not a new view. In 1985 when regulation of the sex industry was first being investigated by Professor Marcia Neave, the Prostitutes Collective of Victoria was calling for a decriminalisation. Victoria's law is finally coming into line with many other jurisdictions. NSW did this as long ago as 1995.

I welcome Consumer Affairs Minister Melissa Horne's statement: "Every Victorian deserves to feel safe in their place of work – decriminalisation will ensure that sex work is safe work and go a long way towards breaking down the stigma sex workers continue to experience."

I am proud of the progress we have forged through mature collaboration between government and the community.



## The Lord's Prayer in Parliament

Thank you to everyone who supported my campaign to remove the recitation a Christian prayer each day in Parliament.

Today, many, many religions are practiced in Victoria. Almost a third of the population follows no religion and almost half of our entire population was either born overseas or has at least one parent who was. So today, compulsory recitation of the Lord's Prayer has become divisive and disrespectful.

My proposal to replace the recitation of the prayer by the President of the Legislative Council with a moment of silent prayer or reflection, is about freedom and fairness. It is still pro-religion, disadvantaging nobody and making space for everybody – whether Christian, of another religion, or secular.

I am glad that the Government listened, and on the floor of Parliament as we debated my motion, the Government committed to reforming the practice, in both houses of Parliament, at the beginning of the next Parliamentary term.

I was incredibly grateful for the support from across the community - leaders such as Reverend Ian Smith, Father Bob Maguire, Dr Meredith Doig, Eddie Micallef from the Ethnic Communities Council, David Aghion from the Jewish Community Council of Victoria - who articulated the case for change extremely well, and the need for our Parliament to reflect the diversity of beliefs across Victoria.

In some ways, this may seem like a small win, but it is symbolic. Discrimination should not be tolerated in any workplace, particularly our Parliament which must

set the tone for our whole community.



## Foundational Cannabis Inquiry Delivered

Last week Parliament's Legal and Social Issues Committee, of which I am Chair, delivered its inquiry report on cannabis use in Victoria.

Cannabis is the most commonly used illicit drug both in Victoria and Australia. This is despite decades of prohibition which has done little to minimise cannabis use or halt illegal growing and supply. Over the last 20 years, rates of cannabis use have remained steady—around 36% (1.9 million) of Victorian adults have used cannabis in their lifetime and 11% in the past 12 months. Cannabis users are more likely to be young people, with those aged 20 to 29 reporting the highest use in the past 12 months (24%), followed by those in the 14 to 19 age group.

Victoria's current approach to cannabis is not working. Police spend many millions of dollars to enforce criminalisation, organised crime makes many millions of dollars from it, and community use remains consistently high (bad pun) —there has to be a better way, which is why I referred this issue for inquiry.

Throughout the inquiry the committee heard compelling evidence that our current approach is not addressing problematic use and is in fact contributing to the harms experienced by vulnerable groups.

The report makes many foundational findings and lays out how we can reduce those harms, and the models of reform that will work for Victoria, including decriminalisation and legalisation.

Although the Government members of the Committee were reticent to be too forward in their recommendations, the facts and findings of the report speak for themselves. Moving towards a regulated and legalised cannabis market in Victoria will help reduce criminal activity relating to the illegal cannabis trade,

including access by children and young people. Regulation would help to reduce the harms associated with consuming a black market product by strictly regulating what is sold, where it is sold and who it is sold to. It would also open opportunities for better community awareness of the mental health and other risks associated with the consumption of cannabis. Several jurisdictions in Europe, the United States, Canada and even our neighbours in the Australian Capital Territory have recognised this and have introduced legislation to decriminalise or legalise cannabis to some degree.

The lessons learnt from these jurisdictions shows that appropriate regulation of adult use of cannabis can be achieved whether that is through the decriminalisation of the use and possession of small quantities of cannabis or a scheme that strictly regulates its sale and cultivation.



## Afghanistan

I know it's hard to look at what's happening in Afghanistan right now, but please look. My heart is breaking as the gains made by women and girls over two decades are being swept away, and hundreds of people who assisted Australian forces are being left for dead.

So many at risk, so many families here fearing for their loved ones' safety, our veterans who worked long and hard to bring some peace and humanitarian relief — they are pleading right now that the we don't look away.

Here is a long form piece I have penned on the [issue](#)



## Save Our Scene

Live music venues are suffering. We must support these much-loved venues now, or we risk losing them forever.

Many venues are facing huge debts and can't operate sustainably ,even when we're in between lock downs. There has been some Government support, but many are finding the grants insufficient and difficult to access. We need more money delivered to them in a simple manner. Our music venues play such a big role in making Melbourne Melbourne.

Our performers are also struggling, musician Alex Lahey penned an open letter to the Prime Minister calling for a wage subsidy for our performing musicians. She's completely right and I hope the Federal Government heed her calls.



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## Mental Health

Melbournians are struggling, hell I'm struggling, lockdown is really hard for everyone, but particularly those whose ability to make a living is compromised. We are social creatures; we have been told to stop one of our evolutionary instincts in order to survive. It's not natural, but there is a good reason why we're doing it.

It has been hard, which is why I support the HACSU's campaign for more mental health nurses. We need more staff, and we need them now.

Check on your friends, don't be too hard on yourself and seek help when you need it. Sometimes it doesn't feel like it, but this will pass.

Take care.

Fiona Patten MP

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