

Capitalising upon political opportunities to reform drug policy: a case study into the development of the Australian Tough on Drugs-Illicit Drug Diversion Initiative.

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Policy analysis

Capitalising upon political opportunities to reform drug policy: A case study into the development of the Australian ‘Tough on Drugs-Illicit Drug Diversion Initiative’

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Abstract

Background

The introduction of political ‘war on drug’ strategies and Prime Ministerial advisory groups increase opportunities for drug policy reform. Yet the strengths and limitations of capitalising upon political opportunities remain unclear. This paper provides a unique insight into the development of an Australian reform, the ‘Tough on Drugs-Illicit Drug Diversion Initiative.’ This reform was one of the major policies to emerge out of the Federal Coalition ‘Tough on Drugs’ strategy. In spite of the rhetoric the Illicit

Drug Diversion Initiative (IDDI) has diverted minor drug users away from the traditional criminal justice system.

Methods

This paper draws upon interviews with 16 expert policy makers involved in the advocacy and negotiations leading up to the adoption of the IDDI to examine what drove the reform and how and why a pragmatic reform emerged.

Results

The IDDI culminated from the presence of five main drivers: a crisis in relation to heroin and crime, antagonism towards the government, a weak but growing evidence-base on the merits of drug diversion, a shift in law enforcement attitudes and persuasive advocacy by a group of non-government experts. This paper contends that the Prime Minister's new 'Tough on Drugs' strategy and expanded governance arrangements created new space for policy actors to intervene in the policy formulation process and to convert the governments proposed 'zero tolerance' response into a more humane and potentially effective response.

Conclusion

This paper concludes that contrary to popular opinion political venues and politicisation may offer valuable opportunities for drug policy reform. The challenge for researchers and policy advocates is to see how they can best utilise political venues to obtain pragmatic reform.



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Keywords

Drug policy; Reform; Policy process; Politicisation; Australia

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