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CHECK AGAINST DELIVER

It is a pleasure to be back in Vienna this year for what is a particularly important stage in the build up to the UN General Assembly Special Session in 2016.

This is my 5<sup>th</sup> Visit to participate in the CND, signifying the importance to which New Zealand attributes to these sessions, and the global issue of narcotic drugs.

Compassion. Innovation. Proportion.

Three words I believe are of the utmost importance and which should be front of mind when drug policy is being considered and developed.

They are of particular relevance given the status of 2016's discussions and the increasingly fluid and sophisticated nature of the drug industry.

Next year's Special Session comes at an important time.

The last decade has seen an ever increasing prevalence of synthetic compounds entering the market.

New Zealand, despite its geographical relative isolation, has not been immune to this trend.

The ongoing presence of insidious synthetic psychoactive products necessitated dedicated legislation in New Zealand to address their widespread availability and constantly changing compositions.

This legislation, the Psychoactive Substances Act was passed in 2013, and subsequently amended in 2014 to remove all products that had been granted interim approval, and also to ban the use of animal testing data for any manufacturer seeking approval to sell products in the future.

There was strong public sentiment that animals should not suffer for the sake of people's recreational drug-taking.

Aside from the two amendments, the Act remains intact and New Zealand continues to allow for the possibility that low risk psychoactive products may be developed in the future, and such products should, after due regulatory consideration, be permitted for sale.

New Zealand's approach, I believe, has been innovative in its response to a seemingly intractable problem, and it is innovation that I believe will hold the key to addressing future drug issues faced by jurisdictions around the world.

Global one-size-fits-all approaches are no longer the responses they once were, with jurisdictions each facing their own unique set of issues to resolve.

Because the world has changed and continues to change at an increasingly rapid pace, law makers must be equally adept at responding and adapting to new challenges or risk being left behind.

In addressing drug-related challenges it is important that a focus on addressing supply issues does not come at the cost of reducing the harm experienced, from either the personal misuse of drugs, or by being around those who misuse drugs.

Responses must be proportionate to the offence/problem, and recognise that overly punitive responses do nothing to address the underlying health, and often social, issues that go hand in hand with drug use.

Put simply, the 'big stick' is not proving the deterrent long desired, and I believe a more compassionate approach to dealing with drug-related issues will generate a more tangible, positive outcome for all parties.

We, as a global community, must continue to move away from rigid law and order responses, and apply a health lens when dealing with those adversely affected by drug use.

I was heartened, at last year's CND meeting, by a perceptible shift to stronger health-based approaches to minimising harm.

While much of the focus over the last three to four years has been on the rise of synthetic psychoactive substances and products, the last 18 months have seen a resurgence in the visibility of cannabis.

Media reports of legislative changes to the status of cannabis around the world, at both federal and state levels, seem to be an almost weekly occurrence.

My office receives regular correspondence seeking legislative change – from comprehensive legalisation to more narrowly-focussed medicinal-cannabis regimes.

Cannabis, I am told is apparently the panacea for a plethora of ailments, some of which, sadly, are painfully debilitating.

For those suffering from such ailments I have enormous sympathy and I have asked my officials in New Zealand's Ministry of Health to look into the evidence and efficacy for cannabis as a medicinal or therapeutic relief.

The evidence, however, has been underwhelming.

As a global community, I believe it is essential that we address the issue of medicinal cannabis on its merits.

Based on the evidence provided to me, I have grave reservations about the efficacy of cannabis for the vast majority of indications that it is being put forward for.

These concerns do not stem from a personal antipathy towards the drug, rather, they stem from the very real likelihood that many sufferers – and in many cases they are children, are being given false hope that cannabis use will significantly ameliorate their symptoms, their pain and their reduced quality of life.

Such a situation is unethical, irresponsible and highly undesirable.

We can, and must, do better.

In closing, I reiterate that compassion, innovation and proportion are key elements in our collective, ongoing work in the drug policy field.

A robust, evidence-based approach is the only responsible path forward, and one which I hope will form the foundation for our discussions at 2016's Special Session.

Thank you.