

The billionaire, drugs and us

Why is US billionaire George Soros so

interested in the reform of WA's drug

laws? **Norman Aisbett** finds out.

REGULAR letter writers to *The West Australian* in recent years have come to include a spokesman for an influential lobby group for drug law reform.

That's not so surprising, except that Robert Sharpe and the Drug Policy Alliance are based in far-off Washington in the US.

Mr Sharpe misses no chance to wade into the debate on the need for softer drug laws relating to cannabis in WA and chides anyone with a contrary opinion.

He declares the "war on drugs" is lost and a waste of costly resources that could be used elsewhere; that illicit drug use does not warrant jail or a criminal record; that only crime

churned about \$50 million of his earnings into the cause of wringing change out of hard-line US drug laws.

With his support, the alliance runs an international grants scheme for projects on "drug policy studies" and invites applications on its website. It also gives special awards for areas such as medical and legal work and political leadership. Several award recipients in Australia have got up to \$10,000 each.

Apart from Mr Soros, 72, the other big backers of the alliance are John Sperling, who made billions by creating the University of Phoenix college system, and Peter Lewis, retired CEO of the Cleveland-based Progressive Corporation Insurance Company.

All three reportedly admit to having smoked cannabis. Mr Soros once said: "I have tried marijuana (cannabis) and I enjoyed it but it did not become a habit and I have not tasted it in many years."

According to a recent *Time* magazine cover story, Mr Sperling, 81, once smoked pot to combat pain associated with the cancer he fought in the 1960s. Mr Lewis, 68, is a prominent campaigner for the legalisation of the

ing to change US drug laws, we need reform in Australia, or some other English-speaking country, to help us pressure our legislators, while also believing it's right for Australians.

"Americans are very ethno-centric. If Thailand were to end the drug war (i.e. soften its laws), Americans might never hear about it, except for a network of drug policy reform advocates. "But if Australia were to dramatically change its drug laws, it would be all over CNN and would impact the debate in the US so much more."

Mr Soros started the Lindesmith Center in 1994 as a project of his Open Society Institute. It was named after Alfred Lindesmith, the first prominent American to challenge conventional thinking on drug policy. Its partner in the alliance, the Drug Policy Foundation (DPF), was founded in 1987.

The executive director of the alliance is fast-talking Harvard PhD Ethan Nadelmann, who has visited Australia twice.

He would presumably be pleased with developments here. In 1987, South Australia decriminalised the law relating to prescribed amounts of cannabis, and the cultivation of a set number of cannabis plants, and similar legislation is imminent in WA.

Under the legislation, expected to be introduced in parliament early next year, the possession of less than 15g of cannabis and up to two plants for personal use will incur a \$100 infringement notice; 15g to 30g and less than three plants will draw a \$150 fine.

Police will retain the right to lay criminal charges for small amounts if they suspect someone is dealing.

HOW this was achieved is an intriguing tale of more than a decade of indefatigable politicking by a network of disciplined activists, who include academics, health professionals and the Australian Parliamentary Group for Drug Law Reform.

The latter group includes 18 WA politicians. Among them are Minister for Planning and Infrastructure Alannah MacTiernan, Agriculture Minister Kim Chance and Greens MPs Christine Sharp, Giz Watson and Jim Scott.

Drug law reformers have also used "subversives" to win a sympathetic ear from the Australian media, according to Bill Stronach, executive director of the Australian Drug Foundation, a Victorian-based education group that gets private and government funding.

In 1992 in Washington he boasted to an international conference on drug policy reform that his organisation had "employed journalists not to churn out press releases but to get in there as subversives and work with their colleagues in the mainstream press.

"And that's done through developing very slowly, and very gently, a level of trust, a level of credibility. . . .

"So we have 24-hour availability of those journalists. . . over the last eight

months, over 50 per cent of the mainstream printed and radio and television reporting on alcohol and drug issues has been generated by the foundation or filtered through it."

When Weekend Extra contacted him, Mr Stronach laughed off the comments as "the worst choice of words I ever made". He had simply hired two or three journalists to deal with the media because "journalists can talk much better to journalists".

In 1997, Mr Soros said: "My sole concern is that the war on drugs is doing untold damage to the fabric of our society. (It is) a utopian dream. Some form of drug addiction or substance abuse is endemic in most societies. Insisting on total eradication of drug use can only lead to failure and disappointment."

With that, he echoes the reformist mantra, worldwide.

He joined the cause after founding the Open Society Institute in 1989. The institute's charter was to fund a global network of Soros foundations to "transform closed societies into open ones and to protect and expand the values of existing open societies".

Its main focus was the East European states made independent by the collapse of the Soviet empire. (Mr Soros was born in Hungary. He is Jewish and as a youth had to flee nazi persecution during World War II. He migrated to the US in 1956.) He began to spend big to help turn several such States into Western-style democracies. He then decided America's own open society was eroding and turned to domestic causes such as immigrants rights, euthanasia and drug reform. In 1994, he entered the drug debate by founding the Lindesmith Center, and emerged as a strong proponent of "harm reduction" and decriminalisation of the personal use of drugs.

Despite his public statements to the contrary, he has also given encouragement to the bigger goal of legalisation. Ethan Nadelmann, who runs the Drug Policy Alliance, is an even more student advocate of the legalisation of drugs, and not only cannabis.

But the first and most achievable policy goal of the alliance and other reformers was the recognition by health authorities of "harm reduction". This involves an acceptance that some people will use drugs regardless of laws and must therefore be helped to do so safely; and that illicit drug use is a health issue, not a criminal matter.

Mr Soros started the International Harm Reduction Development Program in 1995, with the main focus on former Soviet bloc countries - at a time when this approach was also gaining acceptance in many Western nations, including Australia, where like-minded health professionals had begun to promote it in the 1980s.

Advocating measures like methadone programs, needle exchanges, safe injecting rooms, harm reduction is viewed by critics as being the stepping stone to the next reformist goal: decriminalisation.



Anti-drug campaigners Geraldine Mullins (left) and Wendy Herbert.

gangs win from "prohibition" by being able to charge high prices; that cannabis is less dangerous than both tobacco or alcohol, and more.

The Drug Policy Alliance, formed in 2001 by the merging of two major US drug legalisation groups, the Lindesmith Center and the Drug Policy Foundation, is backed by some very powerful figures.

George Soros, for one. He is the billionaire US currency speculator and philanthropist who reportedly once caused the British pound to plummet and in 1997 had Malaysia's Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad, blaming him for the South-East Asian economic collapse.

In the past eight years he has

medical use of marijuana. Two years

ago he was charged with importing 146 grams of cannabis into New Zealand. He was released without conviction on the basis of donating \$53,000 to a drug rehabilitation program.

But why are these men, through the vigilant Mr Sharpe, so keen to encourage cannabis law reform in WA?

Mr Sharpe was happy to explain when Weekend Extra inquired by phone. He said the tough anti-drugs policies of successive US governments were the most "Neanderthal" in the world and threatened to make America the last nation to get liberalised laws.

"From a selfish perspective of want-