

Get Big Brother off our backs

By Ruth Ostrow

I'M driving into Nimbin, in northern NSW, the last hippie bastion on the planet, to attend the infamous Mardi Grass festival held each year.

Thus far I have managed to avoid what is essentially a huge, annual celebration of marijuana smoking, hash-cookie eating and rather wild behaviour such as bong throwing. But I'm in a profoundly civil libertarian mood these days and want to be counted.

I'm still reeling from the horror of finding that many of my friends, minding their own business in downtown Byron Bay, had sniffer dogs sooled on to them by police and were stripped or arrested because traces of marijuana - including smell from being in contact with a smoker - were detected. Around here, traces of marijuana are more common than traces of Vegemite, toast or soapsuds.

To put it in perspective, we're not talking about drug smuggling or heroin dealing here. We're talking about a personal choice to have a smoke at home rather than a beer, in a gentle community comprised of bohemians, artists, hippies and New Age healers who have moved to the region because they like to follow their own rules, their own gods, their own moral standards, quietly and very respectfully of one another. Harming no one.

And it's happening in other parts of the country too. Unemployed sniffer dogs - trained for the Olympics and now with nothing better to do - are being let loose on the public. Which has really got my blood boiling. In a world where we are slowly losing our personal liberties, our freedoms, our privacy, our ability to govern ourselves through our own hearts and souls, it is time to make a stand.

It's not about the right to smoke dope. It's about the right to watch what we want, go where we want and think for ourselves. To choose our own drug of choice, as it were.

We are frogs slowly being cooked in water without realising the flame is on. With the new private freeways in Melbourne and other parts of the country requiring special electronic tags for payment of tolls, our cars can be traced anywhere we go. If sex is our drug of choice and we cross Peach Street at 7pm to visit an illicit lover, then it's recorded in the system.

Our pets are being fitted with microchips so their whereabouts can always be monitored and, similarly, there is a new American tracking device rumoured soon to be embedded in all watches, phones and laptops so we'll never get lost again. Street cameras watch our every move. Provisions in computer software allow our financial statements and private data to be readily accessed.

And according to a new book, soon to be released by esteemed academic and author Dr Helen Caldicott called *The Coming Nuclear War* (Scribe Publications), satellites can now magnify and watch any person, car or house on the planet, if anti-social behaviour is suspected.

Anti-social? Well put it this way, if Hitler were alive today, it would take a few hours to find every Jew, gay, disabled person or Gypsy in the western world, and

probably data about their spending habits, lovers and brand of toothpaste. It's outrageous.

So I'm here among the merrily stoned masses, to raise my voice against increasing breaches of civil liberties. For as long as we follow the Buddhist creed, "Harm none", then as adults we should be allowed to live as we wish without being monitored, intimidated, sniffed, bombarded with junk mail, subliminally manipulated by ads or censored.

Which is a real a sore spot for me because, a few years ago, senators Richard Alston and Brian Harradine were instrumental in hailing the end of the TV program SexLife and my own Sex Show on Triple M radio because they didn't think that adults should be exposed to what they deemed "sexually explicit" material.

But who says that watching someone having sex is more or less offensive than watching Hannibal Lecter eat someone's brain? And by whose standards is smoking cancer sticks or getting drunk to the point of violence less of an offence than taking a drag of a joint?

I've long favoured the motto: Education, not legislation. As a society, we need guidance from our respected peers then to be left in privacy to make our own heartfelt choices, as long as they harm none. To take our own drug of choice - watch naughty movies, get ripped and eat too many chocolates, cross-dress, bark at the moon or tie our lovers up if we choose, without someone calling in the sniffer dogs.

If we don't take a stand now, Big Brother will be more than just a bizarre television show.

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First published in The Weekend Australian SAT 19 MAY 2001