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Dear Mr Coates

Submission: Review of Take-away Liquor Licence Conditions in Alice Springs

The people of Alice Springs have been subjected to the toughest, strictest alcohol policies of any town in Australia for decades.

Yet we still have alcohol related crime, anti-social behaviour and Domestic Violence at some of the highest levels in the country.

Over the years some strategies have worked, others have not worked.

A plethora of different alcohol strategies should address not only HARM and SUPPLY but also DEMAND. The current Labor NT Government has a preference for broad SUPPLY reduction strategies that impact all drinkers, rather than targeting those with serious, habitual alcohol problems.

Any consideration of Alice Springs take-away liquor licence conditions, need to consider:

- The entire history of alcohol restrictions in Alice Springs and Central Australia
- The current balance of supply and demand reduction strategies
- How current alcohol restriction strategies are being measured and reviewed
- How any new alcohol restrictions will be measured and reviewed, in conjunction with existing strategies
- What changes do the actual residents of Alice Springs want to their take-away liquor licence conditions
- What impact a further increase in alcohol restrictions will have on the ECONOMY of Alice Springs
- What impact a further increase in alcohol restrictions will have on the LIFETSYLE of people living in Alice Springs
- What impact a further increase in alcohol restrictions will have on the GLOBAL PERCEPTION of Alice Springs
- What impact a further increase in alcohol restrictions will have on BUSINESS CONFIDENCE, EMPLOYMENT and BUSINESS STABILITY in Alice Springs
- And will an increase in alcohol restrictions actually target the serious drinkers in Alice Springs

In Alice Springs, if you want to know about alcohol restrictions talk to the experts – the people of Alice Springs. We have lived and breathed alcohol restrictions in our town for decades and we have experience of what works and what does not work.

One thing the people of Alice Springs know full well is that, no matter what restrictions are in place, drinkers will always access alcohol or substitute with other harmful substances.

Who is the Government trying to stop from drinking alcohol in Alice Springs – problem drinkers or all drinkers?

This question needs to be answered before embarking on a process of introducing more alcohol restrictions in Alice Springs – who does the Gunner Government want to stop from drinking alcohol in Alice Springs?

Does the Gunner Government want to stop the whole community of Alice Springs from drinking alcohol?

Or does the Gunner Government want to target the problem drinkers?

These are two very different prospects.

If the Government deems that all residents and visitors to Alice Springs cannot be trusted to drink responsibly then presumably more alcohol restrictions will be introduced to limit:

- The quantity of alcohol purchased
- The opening hours of take away liquor outlets

If the Gunner Government chooses to target the problem drinkers, then options such as the expanded use of the Banned Drinkers Register needs to be considered, plus more direct approaches of using Police and Health data to identify problem drinkers and compelling them to undertake treatment, such as Alcohol Mandatory Treatment.

There is no justification or rationale for such a generalised, “hit and miss” approach to an individual health problem such as severe alcoholism.

Are all residents and visitors to Alice Springs and Central Australia to be treated like drunks?

Why should the behaviour of a minority effect the freedom and choice of the majority?

RECOMMENDATION 1

The Government needs to be clear, open and transparent about who they are targeting with additional alcohol restrictions in Alice Springs.

Target the problem drinkers and promote “learning to live with alcohol”

Less than 1% of the population of Central Australia has a serious drinking problem.

This small group of people are highly visible and cause endless problems for themselves, their families and our community.

Targeted strategies need to be developed to ensure that the habitual drunks in our community are identified, restrict access to alcohol and offer alcohol rehabilitation. These “broad brush” alcohol strategies that the present Government has a preference for, fail to hit the target. They unnecessarily impose restrictions on all drinkers and achieve very little.

The Police know who the problem drinkers are.

The Alice Springs Hospital knows who the problem drinkers are, as does Congress and other Aboriginal health services.

An intelligent targeted strategy, using data from these Government and Government funded services, could be used to identify who needs help.

Police Outside of Bottle Shops target people who do not have a legal place to drink alcohol. This has the effect of denying access to alcohol to many problem drinkers.

The BDR has stopped no one from drinking. I asked a take away liquor outlet recently how many people on the BDR try to purchase alcohol from their establishment. They said that it is extremely rare, not even one person per day. They said that people on the BDR get their alcohol through secondary supply.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Target the problem drinkers. Do not target responsible drinkers.

Alcohol Prohibition doesn't work

Most of the remote Aboriginal communities throughout Central Australia have alcohol prohibition.

Alcohol can be purchased at the various road houses along the Stuart Highway, but sales of take away liquor at these outlets is limited. The towns of Central Australia, Alice Springs and Tennant Creek, are the main sources of alcohol for people living in remote areas.

Prohibition does not work in Central Australia as people travel into Alice Springs and Tennant Creek specifically to purchase grog.

Although I do not necessarily advocate grog being sold on remote Aboriginal communities, the fact that alcohol prohibition exists throughout most of the vast geographical area of Central Australia explains in part why Alice Springs and Tennant Creek have such high levels of alcohol consumption and alcohol related social problems.

Any consideration of further alcohol restrictions in Tennant Creek and Alice Springs cannot ignore the state of alcohol prohibition across Central Australia.

The cost of people travelling vast distances, often on unsealed roads, at huge personal risk to themselves and their families to access alcohol, is a huge problem.

Should people who live in areas of alcohol prohibition in Central Australia be permitted to access alcohol in Tennant Creek and Alice Springs?

Should restricted access to alcohol be allowed in Aboriginal communities?

It should be noted that the great success of having Police Outside of Bottle Shops has been due to the ability of Police to refuse alcohol service to people who live in “alcohol prohibition” areas or “restricted areas”.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Address the policy of alcohol prohibition in Central Australia. Consideration needs to be given to how alcohol prohibition in remote areas of Central Australia impacts on the alcohol problem in Alice Springs.

Police Outside of Bottle Shops

The single most effective strategy at reducing alcohol consumption in Alice Springs over the past 20 years is having Police Outside of Bottle Shops. “Police Outside of Bottle Shops” functioned extremely effectively during the former 4 years of the CLP Government in Alice Springs, Katherine and Tennant Creek, with close to 100% coverage, almost 100% of the time.

The Gunner Government adopted a relaxed attitude to “Police Outside of Bottle Shops” when they came to office 2 years ago. This was at the expense of law and order in Alice Springs, at the expense of the welfare of families in Alice Springs for 2 years. Even over the weekend of the Red Centre Nats in Alice Springs, Police were not stationed outside of Bottle Shops.

This led to the usual chaos and mayhem whereby people had relatively free access to alcohol. A quick review of the monthly Police Crime Statistics over the past 6 years will provide evidence of just how effective this strategy has been.

The success of having “Police Outside of Bottle Shops” is not rocket science. Police Outside of Bottle Shops equals less alcohol consumption, equals less alcohol related problems. Not having Police Outside of Bottle Shops equals virtually unchecked consumption of alcohol and the inevitable crime and violence that goes with it. Surely prevention is better than cure.

Note: On Saturday 22nd September, Police were not stationed at most take away liquor outlets in Alice Springs. This is despite the Police Auxiliaries being trained and apparently available to provide this important service.

RECOMMENDATION 4

The Liquor Commission needs to have an agreement with the NT Police Service that the Police provide 100% coverage of Alice Springs Bottle Shops.

Alcohol Mandatory Treatment

The Alcohol Mandatory Treatment program ran under the CLP Government from 2013 to 2016. It targeted only people that had a very serious alcohol problem, who were taken into protective custody by the Police more than three times in 2 months.

It was expensive and like all types of alcohol rehabilitation, Alcohol Mandatory Treatment was rarely successful on the first attempt.

But what Alcohol Mandatory Treatment did do was take up to 25 drunks off the streets of Alice Springs at any given point in time and gave them an opportunity to restore their health and make some positive decisions for themselves. It saved lives.

Alcoholics will rarely voluntarily go into rehabilitation.

Alcohol Mandatory Treatment forced people into rehabilitation. It provided an opportunity for them to access health services. It was a similar model to mandatory treatment for psychiatric illness.

The current NT Government has adopted a purely voluntary approach to alcohol rehabilitation, with the statistics demonstrating that serious drunks are not accessing these services.

RECOMMENDATION 5

That a form of mandatory treatment for alcohol addiction be reintroduced to ensure that people most affected are forced into treatment.

Growing the NT Population – Growing Alice Springs

People will not choose to live in Alice Springs if alcohol restrictions mean they cannot live the life they want.

Who wants to live in a nanny state where adults cannot purchase the type and quantity of alcohol they want?

Who wants to live in a society whereby the Police Commissioner has unlimited powers to close down businesses without explanation or right of appeal?

Who wants to live in a society whereby all adults who choose to drink alcohol are made to feel like they are doing something wrong?

If further alcohol restrictions are introduced to Alice Springs, businesses will be hurt, directly and indirectly. This will impact the whole Alice Springs economy:

- Employment
- Future growth, refurbishment and upgrading of liquor outlets and hospitality services in Alice Springs
- Investment in the town

The impact of further alcohol restrictions will mean that we have more BOUNDARIES and less POSSIBILITIES. It will mean our population in Alice Springs will further decline.

RECOMMENDATION 6

Consideration needs to be given to how more alcohol restrictions that target all drinkers in Alice Springs will stifle the economic and population of our town.

Need to measure the effectiveness of current alcohol restrictions

With such a broad range of alcohol restrictions already in place in Alice Springs, it will be almost impossible to measure the effectiveness of new alcohol restriction strategies such as the BDR and the Alcohol Floor Price.

With the Government espousing their commitment to “evidence based” practice, it cannot in good faith proceed with the introduction of even greater alcohol restrictions in Alice Springs without firstly clarifying exactly how they are going to separate and measure the effectiveness of the BDR and the Alcohol Floor Price.

Introducing even more alcohol restrictions will cloud and distort any data and evidence that is collected.

RECOMMENDATION 7

No more “supply” strategies should be introduced into Alice Springs until the effectiveness of the Banned Drinkers Register, the Alcohol Floor Price and having Police Outside of Bottle Shops are properly measured and evaluated.

Identify the real problem drinkers

The reality is that in Alice Springs most of our serious drinkers are Aboriginal people.

- Our Alice Springs Hospital is full of Aboriginal people with alcohol related health problems.
- Our Alice Springs prison is full of Aboriginal people who have committed alcohol related crimes.

The truth is that Aboriginal people are vastly over represented in all statistics relating to alcohol-related health problems and illness, crime and incarceration rates.

It is essential that all alcohol restrictions take this fact into account and that all measures target the section of our population most effected by the scourge of alcohol in Alice Springs. This is not racist. It is using an evidence based approach.

RECOMMENDATION 8

Evidence needs to be used to identify who the actual problem drinkers are without fear or favour.

Our reputation as a national and international tourist destination will be shattered

There are few, if any, western tourist destinations that have the alcohol restrictions we currently have in Alice Springs.

Tourism is still our number one industry and any further reduction or hit to our tourism industry will have a devastating impact on the whole economy.

Whether we like it or not, whether it is good or bad, the fact of the matter is that tourist generally like to enjoy alcohol when they are on holidays.

Further limiting access to alcohol in Alice Springs will impact tourism.

Some will argue that the current rate of alcohol related crime and violence in Alice Springs, deters tourists. This is true. But place an impost on tourist's access to alcohol, and that will create a greater impact on Alice Springs as a tourist destination.

RECOMMENDATION 9

Consideration needs to be given as to how more alcohol restrictions will impact on our vital tourism industry

Access to alcohol, grog running and substitution

If alcohol is unavailable in Alice Springs, some people will move onto heavier and more dangerous substances. The use of illicit drugs, such as ice, in Alice Springs is a growing concern.

- In Central Australia, we have experienced a long and painful era of petrol sniffing.
- We have seen people go from using petrol to other substances like deodorants and paint.
- We have seen people take to drinking methylated spirits and mouth wash in recent times.

People who have a serious alcohol addiction will substitute. We have seen this in Central Australia for decades. It will happen again if access to alcohol is made even harder.

And of course we have the ongoing proliferation of grog running, which ebbs and flows with the presence or absence of Police Outside of Bottle Shops. The success of grog running is based on the fact that drinkers will pay whatever it costs to access alcohol.

RECOMMENDATION 10

Be mindful that removing access to alcohol will pave the way for substitution and the possible widespread uptake of other more dangerous substances.

Be mindful that grog running is a boom business in Alice Springs and will continue to be, if more alcohol restrictions are introduced.

People's Alcohol Action Coalition

The People's Alcohol Action Coalition is an alcohol lobby group based in Alice Springs. They have very strong but narrow views on the solutions to our alcohol problems in the NT. The People's Alcohol Action Coalition is a left wing organisation, comprising primarily of past and present members and supporters of the Australian Labor party.

Although I have genuine respect for the hard work and commitment demonstrated by the People's Alcohol Action Coalition, their extreme views are not in any way reflective of the broader Alice Springs community.

I am particularly concerned that some members of the NT Liquor Commission have past and present affiliation, membership and/or association with the People's Alcohol Action Coalition. I think this is a conflict of interest that should be addressed by the NT Government and the NT Liquor Commission.

I have serious concerns that the very narrow perspectives of People's Alcohol Action Coalition will be adopted by the NT Liquor Commission, irrespective of the views of the broader Alice Springs community.

RECOMMENDATION 11

That the Liquor Commission address any potential conflicts of interest by Commissioners, in particular having past or present connections or associations the extremist lobby group, called the People's Alcohol Action Coalition.

Balancing SUPPLY and DEMAND strategies

It is far easier to implement supply reduction strategies than demand reduction strategies. Supply reduction strategies do not require identifying clearly the problem drinkers. Demand reduction strategies require a specific targeted approach. The Riley review advocates for a balanced approach, yet to date the NT Government has chosen the easier, expedient supply reduction strategies. Easier is not necessarily the best.

RECOMMENDATION 12

The Liquor Commission take a more balanced approach to further alcohol restrictions in Alice Springs.

The End to our Corner Stores in Alice Springs

Alice Springs has 10 take away liquor outlets, that includes 2 chain store outlets (Woolworths and Coles) and eight locally owned and operated corner stores with liquor outlets.

The recent suggestion of limiting the sale of grog in these outlets to less than 25% of their total sales has sent, particularly these 8 locally owned stores, into a tail spin.

The reality is that these many of these stores will not survive this level of restriction on their alcohol sales. It will break them.

Perhaps this is what the NT Gunner Government wants, to see these businesses go bust and achieve their goal of reducing the number of take away liquor outlets at any cost.

Four out of these eight businesses are Aboriginal owned businesses: Lhere Artepe owns the three local IGA stores and Tangentyere Council owns Milner Road Supermarket (Ivy's). These businesses are likely to be at risk of closing if this 25% limit is introduced. Closing Aboriginal businesses is bad policy.

Other small liquor outlets, such as Piggly's and the Heavitree Gap Supermarket will be profoundly affected by the NT Government's attempt to constrict and close small liquor outlets.

Coles and Woolworths will obviously survive, over and above their small rivals. Coles and Woolworths are not locally owned and operated. They send their astronomical profits straight out of town. Centralising the sale of grog to essentially advantage two multinational supermarket chains, at the cost of local operators, is unethical and anti-competitive.

This is bad Government policy.

RECOMMENDATION 13

Rather than deliberately make take away liquor outlets commercially unviable by imposing more restrictions, offer to buy their licences back at market rate.

That the Liquor Commission consider the impact of the closure of suburban supermarkets on the amenity of people living in Alice Springs.

That the Liquor Commission consider how further liquor restrictions placed on take away liquor outlets could create a competitive advantage for the large chain stores.

Public Hearings of the NT Liquor Commission

Changes to alcohol restrictions in Alice Springs is a matter of public importance.

The NT Liquor Commission have a responsibility to ensure that the public is fully engaged on this matter and that Alice Springs people have a say in any significant changes to take away liquor licences.

To date, the people of Alice Springs have not been engaged at all on this matter. A couple of advertisements in the Centralian Advocate is all the NT Liquor Commission have done to advise the public about this review.

Recommendation 14

That the NT Liquor Commission should hold a Public Hearing in Alice Springs to discuss the introduction of more alcohol restrictions in Alice Springs, before making any decisions.

Equity across the NT

Will the NT Liquor Commission be taking a fair and equitable approach to alcohol restrictions across the whole of the NT?

At present it appears that Tennant Creek and Alice Springs are being unfairly targeted by the NT Government and the NT Liquor Commission. This is discriminatory.

Will similar alcohol restrictions be introduced to Darwin, for example?

Why have only liquor outlets in Tennant Creek and Alice Springs been closed by the Police Commissioner using his new discretionary powers, and none in the Top End?

The NT Liquor Commission, the NT Police Commissioner and the NT Government has a responsibility to treat all Territorians fairly when it comes to implementing and enforcing alcohol restrictions.

In the suburb of Nightcliff (the electorate of the Minister responsible for Liquor Licensing), drunks drink openly on the foreshore every day and the shopping centre is constantly targeted by vandals and criminals. It is a hot spot for alcohol related crime and anti-social behaviour. Restricting take away liquor licences in this area to the same restrictions and scrutiny as what is in place in Alice Springs, seems fair and reasonable. The same problems should mean the same interventions.

RECOMMENDATION 15

That the Liquor Commission must take a fair approach to imposing liquor restrictions across the whole NT, with no exemptions given to Darwin.

Conclusion

My overall advice to the NT Liquor Commission is to proceed with caution when it comes to introducing MORE alcohol restrictions in Alice Springs.

What do you really know and understand about the effectiveness of the dozens of different alcohol reduction strategies that have been operating in our town for decades?

Do you know and understand what alcohol restrictions currently exist in Alice Springs? And do you know how effective each of them are on an individual basis?

Further penalising the take away licence holders in Alice Springs is easy. But will more alcohol restrictions placed on grog shops ultimately stop anyone from drinking? I doubt it.

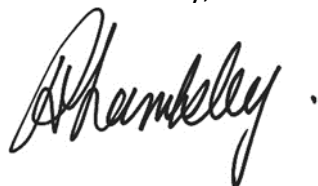
Until the problem drinkers themselves are identified and made to stop drinking, nothing much will change. What we know from the recent Tennant Creek experience and from past restrictions introduced into Alice Springs, drinkers will leave town if they cannot access grog. Geographically moving the problem to Darwin or Mount Isa, is not solving the problem.

The most successful alcohol reduction strategy we have seen in decades in Alice Springs is having Police Outside of Bottle Shops. The full operation of this strategy has seen a marked reduction in alcohol consumption and alcohol related crime and anti-social behaviour in Alice Springs.

The success of having Police Outside of Bottle Shops, would indicate that many, if not most, of our problem drinkers in Alice Springs are primarily people who come from “restricted areas” (or alcohol free, prohibition areas) such as remote Aboriginal communities and Town Camps.

Perhaps this is where the NT Liquor Commission should start their deliberations.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Robyn Lambley', followed by a period.

ROBYN LAMBLEY MLA
Member for Araluen
28th September 2018