

Backing cops, nurses, doctors on alcohol violence

Social Issues briefing #096, 22/06/2011 [addendum updated].

‘Alcohol takes souls.’

(Hosea 4:11, paraphrased)

A surprising coalition. What do the Police Association,¹ the NSW Council of Churches,² ANGLICARE Sydney,³ the NSW Nurses Association,⁴ surgeons⁵ and doctors⁶ all have in common?

In an effort to reduce alcohol related violence, these groups have asked the NSW Government to trial earlier closing times for licensed premises in NSW.

Binge-fuelled street violence is on the rise around Australia.⁷ But the O’Farrell Liberal Government and the Australian Hotels Association oppose a widespread trial of earlier closing times for licensed premises.

Yet recent trials of 3am closing times for licensed premises in the Newcastle CBD produced significant reductions in the frequency and intensity of alcohol related violence. The top Sydney venues for alcohol related violence are already required to abide by tougher licensing provisions, so the Government’s resistance to a broader trial of 3am closing is hard to understand.

This briefing is to inform you of the serious concerns about alcohol related violence that are emerging across our community. It also argues why *earlier closing times for licensed premises* offers a way forward, helping to make our communities safer and healthier.

What’s it to Christians? In the past, Christians typically sought social and policy reforms to alcohol abuse. Earlier generations came up with initiatives to help individuals, such as Alcoholics Anonymous and the ‘temperance’ movement. But they were also political activists. They argued for tough liquor licensing provisions, and opposed policies for extended trading hours. The pejorative term ‘wowsers’ was often used to attack their social interventions, and they generally lost the battle.

Today, evangelical Christians have largely vacated this political space. But this political quietism is not only a response to our grandparents being called ‘wowsers’. It has been more generally justified by appeals to ‘two kingdom’ theology: that churches should look after church business, and that ‘rulers’ should look after State business. (‘Two kingdoms’ theology is a contestable reading of Matt. 22:16–21 and Rom. 13:1–7.) It has been justified by appeals to evangelism, as if this core activity is the only worthy form of social engagement by Christians. It is justified by the view that people who don’t have the Spirit of God can be expected to display ‘drunkenness’, a fruit of the flesh (Gal. 5:19–21), and no law will stop that.

But a coalition of citizens who demand our respect and support now occupies the political space that Christians vacated. With an element of real desperation, police, nurses, doctors and criminologists have joined forces. Now, *they* are called ‘wowsers’.⁸ They see and suffer from street behaviour that few Christians go near. There is a significant opportunity for Christians to re-engage the community by affirming and supporting those who provide

valuable public services, while also seeking the welfare of people damaged by alcohol related violence.

The quotation from Hosea (above) reflects the hard-hitting Hebrew original. Alcohol abuse reduces us. It takes away our inner self. It robs us of our heart, our soul. It corrodes us at our core. It ruins our personhood. Christian social engagement will continue to show those who party hard, and who have developed an addiction to alcohol, that twenty or thirty drinks per night cannot replace reconciled relationships of love with God and with others.

But there is also a place to restrain the extreme damage that extreme drinkers do to police, paramedics, themselves and one another. Police, doctors and nurses need our support.

And our political leaders need some serious confrontation.

Main advocacy reforms. According to their *Last Drinks* campaign, what police and others want is simple:

Police Officers, Doctors, Nurses and Ambulance Officers are sick of dealing with the effects of alcohol-related violence. ... The hotel industry's mantra of personal responsibility is not working. Experience has shown, however, that stronger restrictions on late night trading at pubs and clubs does make a difference.⁹

Doctors, nurses, ambulance officers and police are, quite simply, sick and fearful of dealing with the effects of intoxicated patrons of licensed premises late at night and in the early hours of the morning. They are abused, intimidated, threatened, assaulted and injured in the course of their duties. They attend to the seriously injured, are forced to struggle to restrain both male and female intoxicated violent offenders who are no longer in control of themselves ... Our members are also forced to have to remove vomit, urine and excrement from intoxicated persons and off themselves, their clothing, equipment, vehicles and holding areas.¹⁰

The *Last Drinks* coalition asks for five simple measures:

- after 10pm, prohibit the sale of shots and other high-alcohol drinks;
- 1am lockout for all NSW hotels (a lockout escorts intoxicated people off the premises and does not allow them to re-enter);
- extend 3am closing across NSW;
- licensed venues adopt other management policies; and
- the impact of these measures on violent crime be carefully studied after a twelve month trial.

The need for change: Sydney CBD. In December 2008 a number of licensing restrictions were placed on the top 50 licensed premises for assaults in the Sydney Central Business District (CBD). These changes were in response to an upward trend in assaults between midnight and 5am. The restrictions included 2am lockouts and several other 'brakes' on alcohol service.

There was a marked decline in the incidence of alcohol related violence after these changes. The data is ambiguous as to what caused the decline,¹¹ but the

results are consistent with other studies showing that liquor licensing restrictions help reduce alcohol-related violence.¹²

What has become clear though, is the extraordinary prevalence of assaults around licensed premises. 37 percent of assaults occurred within 20 metres of licensed premises and 57 percent occurred within 50 metres.¹³

This is a great deal of violence in a very small perimeter. The *Last Drinks* proposals would likely reduce it. (A lower density of licensed premises would also reduce the number of intoxicated persons congregating in local areas.)

Alcohol related violence: cost to the community. The necessity for change is well justified in public policy terms.

The Australian Institute of Criminology¹⁴ identifies alcohol-related violence as a major social and economic cost to the community. Conservative estimates from 2008 put the total cost of alcohol related crime in Australia at \$1.6 billion.¹⁵

The NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (BOCSAR) estimated the cost of policing alcohol-related activity in NSW in 2005 was \$50 million. That would pay the salaries of *1000 full-time constables*.¹⁶

But these dollar amounts are only a proxy measure for the real costs. We sometimes use this kind of economic talk to stay a little distant from human costs that no amount of money can repay. There is little data on the cost of alcohol related violence to the NSW Health system, but the 2010 report of the NSW Chief Health Officer estimates that alcohol caused more than 1,220 deaths and 48,000 hospitalisations in NSW.¹⁷

A success: Newcastle's trial of earlier closing hours. The Newcastle City Council's trial of earlier closing hours for licensed premises in the Newcastle CBD has been evaluated by the University of Newcastle,¹⁸ with clear and positive outcomes.

- In 2008 licensed premises in the Newcastle CBD started ceasing alcohol service at 3am, and closing at 3.30am, in response to community pressure to reduce alcohol related violence.
- Alcohol related violence **dropped by 37%** as a result of the earlier closing times (measured in comparison to pubs at nearby Hamilton, which did not close earlier).
- Both the severity and incidence of alcohol related violence was reduced, relieving pressure on police and health services.

The resistance: hotels and government. Prior to the 2011 NSW election, both Barry O'Farrell and then-Premier Kristina Keneally acknowledged the effectiveness of the Newcastle initiatives. Yet they refused to apply the model more broadly across Sydney and NSW.

Both argued that local solutions were needed, in consultation with local communities. For example, licensed premises around Manly have recently volunteered to trial earlier closing times. Both politicians thought that local communities could similarly convince local publicans to voluntarily adopt earlier closing times.

This emphasis on voluntary agreement suits the Australian Hotels Association (AHA), which has denounced as “draconian and nanny-state”¹⁹ the calls to expand the Newcastle model across all licensed premises.

Since being elected to Government, Barry O’Farrell has maintained that the Liberal Coalition Government will not support trials of earlier closing times for licensed premises, saying that local solutions should be negotiated.

This agreement with the AHA position is entirely puzzling. Consider:

- Very few people will be inconvenienced by a 3am closing time. Some people may move on to bottle shops, but many will simply go home. Note that some venues already close earlier than 3am and so will be unaffected. For venues now open until 5am, the change is minimal.
- It is hard to imagine that hotel revenues will be seriously affected by the loss of business at that late hour. However if revenues at that hour *are* high enough to be seriously affected, then we would need to ask how rigorously these establishments are observing government-mandated Responsible Service of Alcohol (RSA) rules in the early morning.
- At a strategic level, a Liberal government should be more likely to see that a healthy community makes a healthy economy.

Speak up. Write to the **NSW Premier**:

The Hon Barry O’Farrell MP
Premier
Level 40 Governor Macquarie Tower
1 Farrer Place
SYDNEY NSW 2000

and to **your local State MP** (find who at www.abc.net.au/tv/qanda/find-your-local-mp.htm) and ask the NSW Government to trial earlier closing times for all licensed premises. Local communities should also be consulted and educated in how to deal with intoxicated persons.

A letter triggers a formal response and is more effective than email.

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for the Social Issues Executive, Diocese of Sydney*

Addendum

A relevant story appeared on the same day as our briefing. (Sean Nicholls, [‘O’Farrell lets clubs off drink controls.](#)’ *SMH* June 21, 2011.)

It outlines a policy targeting violent licensed venues. If these venues break the conditions of their liquor licence up to six times over three years, the licence will be cancelled for at least 12 months, and the licensee permanently banned.

But oddly, **the policy will not apply to clubs**, some of which are associated with high levels of violence. The story then details a special deal between the Liberal government and clubs, and notes the high levels of club donations that went to the Party prior to the recent election.

If true, the story is concerning. Remember that clubs are the main venue for ‘electronic gaming machines’ (EGMs, i.e. pokies), and that the Liberal government will resist Federal initiatives to set loss limits on these machines. (See Rebecca Belzer and Andrew Cameron, [‘Tackling poker machines head on.](#)’ *Social Issues briefing* #091, 29 April 2011.)

See over for **endnotes / further reading** →

Endnotes/further reading

¹ Scott Weber, '[Last orders for drunken aggression](#),' *SMH* November 9, 2010; Clementine Cuneo, '[Generation Binge: top cop's fears over drink-until-you-drop culture](#),' *The Daily Telegraph* December 14, 2010; Clementine Cuneo, '[Surgeons join police to change culture of binge drinking ahead of weekend blitz](#),' *The Daily Telegraph* December 14, 2010.

² NSW Council of Churches Media Release, '[Churches back police call to curb booze-fuelled violence](#),' 24 January 2011.

³ Peter Kell, '[Engage the Future](#),' *Sydney Anglicans* March 30, 2011.

⁴ NSW Nurses Association Media Release, '[Nurses Call For Measures On Alcohol Related Crime](#),' 2 April, 2010.

⁵ Royal Australasian College of Surgeons Media Release, '[Alcohol related injury the focus of Trauma Week](#),' November 17, 2010.

⁶ E.g. Yen F. Tai, John B. Saunders and David S. Celermajer, '[Collateral damage from alcohol abuse: the enormous costs to Australia](#),' *MJA* 1998; 168: 6-7.

⁷ Stephen Lunn, '[Nights of drunken rages](#),' *The Australian* May 14, 2011.

⁸ Scott Weber, '[Who are you calling a wowser Kristina?](#)' *The Punch* 2 April 2011.

⁹ *Last Drinks* campaign, <http://www.keepourcops.org.au>.

¹⁰ *Last Drinks* [main report](#), p. 6. **** This document is a most helpful 'next step'. ****

¹¹ Steve Moffatt, Amanda Mason, Chloe Borzycki and Don Weatherburn, '[Liquor licensing enforcement and assaults on licensed premises](#),' NSW Bureau of Crime, Bureau Brief Issue paper no. 40 October 2009.

¹² Steve Moffatt and Don Weatherburn, '[Trends in assaults after midnight](#),' NSW Bureau of Crime Bureau Brief Issue paper no. 59 April 2011.

¹³ Melissa Burgess and Steve Moffatt, '[The association between alcohol outlet density and assaults on and around licensed premises](#),' BOSCAR Crime And Justice Bulletin No. 147 January 2011 p. 1.

¹⁴ Australian Institute of Criminology portals: http://www.aic.gov.au/crime_types/drugs_alcohol.aspx and http://www.aic.gov.au/crime_types/violence/alcohol%20and%20drug%20related%20violence.aspx . See also media release, '[Study finds that alcohol leads to weekend assaults](#),' 4 May 2011.

¹⁵ Australian Bureau of Criminology, '[Key issues in alcohol-related violence](#),' December 2009.

¹⁶ NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research and National Drug Research Institute, '[Estimating the short-term cost of police time spent dealing with alcohol-related crime in NSW](#),' 2007.

¹⁷ Available in various formats at <http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/publichealth/chorep/index.asp>.

¹⁸ Ian Kirkwood, '[Fights down as pubs shut early](#),' *Newcastle Herald*, 16 Sep, 2010, reporting on work of Associate Professor Kypros Kypri and team published in the international scientific journal, *Addiction*. See also BOSCAR, '[The impact of restricted alcohol availability on alcohol-related violence in Newcastle](#),' December 2009.

¹⁹ Sally Fielke, spokesperson AHA, ABC Radio AM, 16 September 2010.

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