

5

The rise and fall of the Tyeweretye Club: A case study

While most of the lobbying, political and otherwise, for Aboriginal people to have their own licensed canteens or clubs envisaged facilities in remote bush communities—‘out of sight, out of mind’—some people proposed town-based social clubs designed for, and owned by, Aboriginal people. One was the Woden Town Club in Canberra, which catered largely for Aboriginal public servants (see Chapter 6). Another was the Tyeweretye Club, a licensed premise south of Alice Springs that opened in 1993 and closed in 2005. ‘*Tyeweretye*’ in Western Arrernte means ‘people being together’.¹ The Tyeweretye Club polarised opinion in the town and beyond, affecting Aboriginal groups, their representative bodies, the Northern Territory Government and the Liquor Commission. Arguments for and against its explicit strategy of ‘teaching’ moderate drinking lasted for more than a decade.

Lobbying for a club in Alice Springs

The idea for an Aboriginal club in Alice Springs was first floated in 1975 by Aboriginal men who were interviewed as part of a study of alcohol use sponsored by the Regional Council for Social Development. The report’s title, *40 gallons a head*, referred to the author, Liz Wauchope’s (1975)

1 *Tyeweretye* = ‘getting together’ or ‘people being together’. This information comes from Betty Pearce, then a key member of Tangentyere Council (pers comm, 8 August 2008).

estimate that the population of the southern region of the Northern Territory consumed 40.9 gal of beer, per person, every year—almost twice as much as any other heavy-drinking community for which data were available (3). Wauchope made this estimate before it became possible to calculate alcohol consumption using the percentage of pure alcohol in drinks.² Questionnaires were circulated to residents of Alice Springs, and 300 randomly selected households were interviewed with the help of a young Aboriginal field officer from the Aboriginal Medical Centre, Geoffrey Shaw.³ At the time, there were approximately 20 Aboriginal 'fringe camps' on the outskirts of town, with people living in shanties, tents and humpies; 30 of these residents were also interviewed for the study—mostly young Aboriginal men, all of whom were drinkers. The young men spoke of the social pressures to drink, their personal problems, bad living conditions and the fact that they had no viable employment or entertainment as alternatives to drinking; they were especially concerned about the drinking of methylated spirits in the camps. They thought they should have better living conditions and, perhaps surprisingly, they believed that there should be fewer liquor outlets and more control over sales. Asked what would help them to stop or better control their drinking (all but one said they wished to do this), Wauchope noted that:

Most replied that *there is a need for an Aboriginal club with pleasant facilities* where they can be among friends in a relaxed environment. Opinion was divided as to whether this should be licensed or not. Most believed that meaningful employment, particularly out bush, would lessen alcohol consumption. (14, emphasis added)

The following year, the HRSCAA was asked by the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Ian Viner, to examine the effect of alcohol on Aboriginal communities. Chaired by Philip Ruddock, the HRSCAA conducted hearings throughout the country in 1976 and 1977, and received submissions from interested parties. The Central Australian Aboriginal Congress (CAAC), a new community-controlled health service based in Alice Springs, sent in a lengthy and detailed submission. Written by its senior medical officer, Dr Trevor Cutter, the CAAC's (1976) submission also raised the issue of a social club:

2 The Regional Council for Social Development was chaired by Mr EA Robertson, Labor Senator for the Northern Territory, 1975–87. The study was prompted by community concerns over alcohol abuse and the decriminalisation of public drunkenness: as of 21 October 1975, intoxicated people could be taken into protective custody without charge.

3 Twenty years later, Geoff Shaw became the general manager of Tangentyere Council, representing Aboriginal residents of Alice Springs.

One of the most urgent needs within Alice Springs is the development of an effective and social club where Aboriginal People can meet and socialize utilizing alcohol as a social cohesive factor rather than an obstructive one. At present, Aboriginal People are forced to use one Hotel in Alice Springs (the Alice Springs Hotel); this is the only hotel which provides a service to tribal Aboriginal people. Other Hotels due to mainly dress regulations provides alcohol only to whites and urban Aboriginal People. This social club could be effectively developed linking to the Football and other sporting bodies which could provide meals and family activities. *It would develop an important educative role* and provide some cohesion to the Aboriginal communities ... Whites generally are fully housed, live within urban Alice Springs and Tennant Creek, have motor vehicles and have a large number of clubs and hotels that they can drink within. Aboriginal People having only one Hotel⁴ and the river bed and having to come to town to drink. (1196–97, emphasis added)

At that time in Alice Springs, there were 51 licensed outlets: 17 stores, which included supermarkets, 16 restaurants or private hotels, seven clubs, eight liquor merchants and three public hotels (Wauchope 1975: 3). Notwithstanding the number of licensed outlets, it was a time when Aboriginal people were often served from ‘dog windows’ at the rear of premises (Commonwealth of Australia 1977, Hansard, 4 June 1976: 1289). Aboriginal people were excluded from many on-licensed premises by dress regulations: ‘the blacker your skin the tidier you have to be’, one Aboriginal man explained (Harold Furber, cited in Simmons 1988: 6). This restricted access to on-licensed premises was one cause of the uncontrolled consumption of takeaway alcohol, which was increasingly accessible in hotel bottle shops and supermarkets.

Nothing came of these early suggestions for a town club until the 1980s, when another Aboriginal organisation, Tangentyere Council, began to push for the establishment of such a facility. With responsibility for, and representation from, residents of the town camps, Tangentyere took the initiative on a growing public drinking problem in Alice Springs by commissioning several research reports. By the early 1980s, Alice Springs was becoming something of a tourist town, and keeping drunks away from the public eye was an ongoing concern of the civic authorities. Despite the advent of the Northern Territory’s ‘Two Kilometre Law’ in 1982, which

4 There was also the Riverside Hotel, licensed in 1959 (now known as the Todd Tavern). It had a bar, known as the ‘Snake pit’, which was gradually abandoned by non-Aboriginal drinkers, and became predominantly an Aboriginal bar. The licensee eventually took all the furniture away because the chairs were used in fights (Brady fieldnotes).

made public drinking illegal within 2 km of a licensed establishment, unconstrained drinking in the open, and in the town camps, was a significant problem. The law was a clever government strategy designed to covertly target Aboriginal drinking by imposing spatial, rather than racial, constraints (d'Abbs 2012). One researcher counted 17 open-air drinking spots around Alice Springs, excluding the riverbeds; in a single weekend, over 180 Aboriginal people used the dry Todd River for social drinking (Simmons 1988: 7). The Two Kilometre Law drove Aboriginal drinkers into the town camps, causing 'severe repercussions' (Buckell 1986: 9) for the residents there. The law provoked an 'unprecedented period of violence' (O'Connor 1983: 8), as non-drinkers now had to deal with increased numbers of drunks and associated problems of domestic violence. Bill Ferguson, a non-Aboriginal man who was a town camp resident and who later became the manager of the Tyeweretye Club, witnessed the poverty and drunkenness provoked by the Two Kilometre Law. He recalled that violence in the camps was 'terrible, houses would be knocked down as quick as built, women bashed. No-one was game to go to the camps'.⁵

In 1983, Tangentyere Council convened a subcommittee to oppose the Two Kilometre Law, which grew into the Tangentyere Liquor Committee, a grassroots planning hub on alcohol issues in Alice Springs and the town camps.⁶ The Liquor Committee⁷ concentrated its efforts on two strategies: it opposed applications for new takeaway liquor licences, especially those associated with food outlets and shops (Lyon 1990), and took up the idea of having Aboriginal-controlled venues for drinking. As Buckell (1986: 9) observed:

Drinking was not going to disappear, and the establishment of many strong Aboriginal organisations in town during the 1970s ... had given people an opportunity to organise. These organisations also encouraged a sense too, perhaps for the first time in living memory, of something to fight for in the battle against grog abuse.

5 Bill Ferguson, pers comm, 6 August 2008.

6 Tangentyere Council supported grassroots initiatives such as 'Grog Forums', local alcohol workers, an alcohol planning unit and a Social Behaviour Project designed to improve rules of behaviour for visitors to town camps.

7 The Tangentyere Liquor Committee had representatives from each of the town camps and included Eli Rabuntja (Chairman of Tangentyere Council), Doug Abbott (President of Congress), Tony Booth, Doug Walker, Bill Ferguson and Sue Craig.

The Tangentyere Liquor Committee's main concern was the absence of:

Retail bar outlets at which [Aboriginal people] can drink legally and harmoniously in Alice Springs ... Aboriginal people are not accepted in hotels or the clubs in town and therefore everything possible should be done to give them facilities where they can socialise together in an environment that they can control. (Hungerfords 1986: 4)

In 1986, the Stuart Arms Hotel was demolished to make way for a shopping complex, depriving Aboriginal drinkers of a popular drinking spot; its corner bar was affectionately nicknamed the 'burri bar'⁸ (Buckell 1986). Tangentyere Council used the occasion to publicise its concern that, without controlled drinking venues, there was little hope of making inroads into alcohol abuse. Aboriginal social clubs, they said, 'would be places not only for drinkers, but for all the family, with wet and dry bars, recreation facilities, health, transport and social support services' (Ferguson 1986: 9). The Liquor Committee proposed the establishment of Aboriginal-controlled social clubs 'where "safe" drinking patterns can be developed and modelled for younger people' (Simmons 1988: 18, Coughlan 1991). The proposal was designed to create 'healthier, socially acceptable drinking patterns in the Aboriginal community' (Tangentyere Council 1991: 95). Tangentyere Council became the driving force behind what was to be a long struggle to establish an urban Aboriginal club. The process coincided with widespread polarised debate in the Northern Territory about alcohol and Aboriginal people, and the emergence of a grassroots anti-grog movement.

Plans and consultations

With the help of academic researchers, Tangentyere Council used clinical research literature on 'social learning' and 'controlled drinking' to support its case, much as the research team led by John Leary had done in 1975 (Leary et al. 1975: 27) (see Chapter 4). While acknowledging that there were problems in using clubs as a means of educating people into better drinking styles, Tangentyere Council (1991: 95) cited behavioural research on changing dependent drinkers into social drinkers. One of the references they cited questioned earlier positive findings that alcoholics had learned to engage in moderate or controlled drinking (Pendery et al.

8 *Burri* = 'brother' or 'friend'.

1982), and while most of the studies reported on behaviour modification during treatment, none demonstrated that a licensed venue could bring about lasting change to drinking styles. However, Tangentyere Council argued a subtler point: that Aboriginal ownership and control of the outlet would, in itself, change people's drinking behaviour. They explained:

We are expected to drink it and we are expected to die from it, but we are not expected to have agency in it. I am not advocating the wholesale selling of alcohol to Aboriginal people by Aboriginal people, but that is what is happening from the broader community and we do not have any agency whatsoever in the liquor side of things. I think what I am saying is that we need agency. Having agency, we can bring about control ... Learning to associate alcohol with food is something that has never been tried. Learning to use alcohol in an environment in which you own and control it or it is owned and controlled by other Aboriginal people is something that has never been tried. (Tilmouth 2001: 436)

Geoff Shaw, general manager of Tangentyere Council for over 20 years, framed owning the club in political terms: 'The Club is about Aboriginals making their own way through life, it's for people to find comfort drinking with their own people. Self determination requires self management' (Northern Territory Liquor Commission 1997: 12).

The original (optimistic and over-complicated) plan was for four licensed clubs located in different parts of Alice Springs (north, south, east and west) that would cater to different language or social groups (i.e. Pitjantjatjara, eastern and western Arrernte and Warlpiri). Initially, two clubs were to be built (the North Club and the South Club), to be followed by two more at a later stage. With this in mind, the official name of the incorporated body was 'Tyweretye Clubs', and its constitution stated that it aimed to establish, operate and maintain 'licensed social clubs at which Aboriginal people may consume alcohol in a controlled environment'. The organisation was 'always of the opinion that there should be more than one club in and around Alice Springs' (Ferguson 2003: 88). One prominent Aboriginal woman stated:

We decided the best thing was for four clubs, east, west, north and south. So that people would have ownership. If [it's] not ours, [there's] no respect. The east and northeast mob didn't get on with the Warlpiri mob.

An Aboriginal man reiterated this, stressing that when people drink they like to choose their drinking companions:

North side people, you can't even come through the Gap!⁹ Couldn't even trust to come through the Gap! People would think 'I will] stay here, where I can look after myself'. You get the feel of the town, the feel of the grog, so you stay here, drink with mates, stay with their [own] crew, can't go somewhere else. (Tony Booth, pers comm, May 2009)

Reinforcing the desire for more than one club as a way of minimising trouble, several local people (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) spoke about changes to hotels in the town in the 1970s and 1980s, which they felt had exacerbated conflict within the Aboriginal community. Hotels in Alice Springs had been, in some respects, more welcoming to Aboriginal people back in the 1960s: in those days, there were lax dress requirements, larger bars, beer gardens and 'plenty room' to move around; Aboriginal people could reconnoitre, see who was there and whether there were people to avoid. Tony Booth, an Aboriginal man who worked at the Central Australian Aboriginal Alcohol Planning Unit (CAAAPU), recalled:

When they started off in '64 [when drinking rights came in] they [Aboriginal people] had a pub, big rooms, food, plenty room. Pub had a beer garden too. Them two, Stuart and 'Underdowns' [The Hotel Alice] they had a beer garden.¹⁰ Stuart Arms had different saloon bars. Not many people in pub then, 10 here, 10 there, different mob, moving around, changing round the pub. Now it's closed in. You might not want to meet up with someone [you could choose where you drank and who with in those early days compared with now].

While proposing four clubs 'raised the eyebrows of bureaucrats' (Buckell 1986: 9), some commentators stated, candidly, that the idea 'was to have four clubs where different language groups could go without running into each other' (Tilmouth 2001):

The Clubs must reflect traditional Aboriginal identity, and provide suitable places for the separate language groups ... They must firstly attract drinkers who are in the creek beds and on the camps, and secondly encourage them to seek alternatives to binge drinking. The Liquor Committee believes this can only happen if the structure and organisation of the Clubs reflects and supports traditional systems of authority. (Buckell 1986: 9)

9 Heavitree Gap is known as the entrance to Alice Springs from the south; it is named after a gap in the McDonnell Ranges. It is an Arrernte site.

10 The Hotel Alice had a big square yard at the back dubbed 'Madison Square Gardens' because of all the fights that took place there (Dick Kimber, pers comm, 1 August 2008).

The Liquor Committee consulted widely. It hired accounting firm KMG Hungerfords to prepare an operational and financial proposal for the clubs. KMG, which had its own club and hotel management services unit, advised Tangentyere Council on the staffing levels and costs involved in training Aboriginal staff in hospitality, literacy and numeracy, and provided advice on issues of alcohol abuse and rehabilitation.¹¹ KMG staff spent a week in Alice Springs meeting with Tangentyere Council representatives and assessing the financial viability of the clubs. Based on the population of Aboriginal people in Alice Springs and surrounds, they estimated that approximately 1650 people would use the clubs on a regular basis. The consultants estimated (over optimistically, as it turned out) that a pricing structure like that of other clubs would yield a 45 per cent gross profit.¹² They also estimated that income from poker machines could be in the vicinity of \$72,000 per annum.¹³ Overall, their report was positive. They concluded:

Based on a suitable level of support from funding bodies, a continuation of the energetic support and initiatives from senior members of the Aboriginal community, and an acceptance by the general body of local Aboriginal people, the clubs: should be largely self-funding; and will provide a tangible opportunity for the community to address several social difficulties in a sensible concerned manner. (Hungerfords 1986: 18)

Tangentyere Council approached potential funding bodies, interested government agencies, the police and the Alice Springs Town Council (Buckell 1986), and received support from influential bodies including the DAA, the ADC and the Northern Territory Department of Community Development. A Northern Territory Legislative Assembly (1991) inquiry into the use and abuse of alcohol was supportive, as was the Northern Territory Government's LWA program. Initiated in 1991, LWA was a progressive and bold public health strategy directed at reducing alcohol-related harm in the Northern Territory; it was personally supported by the Northern Territory Chief Minister, and answered directly to him.¹⁴

11 This was to be provided by the Gillen House School of Tourism and Hospitality, part of the Central Australian Community College.

12 The KMG report priced drinks at other clubs in Alice Springs, such as the Verdi Club and sporting clubs, and it listed the membership fees charged by other clubs in Alice Springs at the time.

13 The inclusion of poker machines in the club appears to have been uncontested at this time.

14 LWA was originally funded through a levy on alcohol products containing more than 3 per cent alcohol, which raised millions of dollars. However, in 1997, the High Court disallowed the states and territories from raising revenue in such a manner and the LWA program had to develop alternative funding mechanisms. LWA has since lapsed (National Drug Research Institute and Lewin Fordham Group 1999).

5. THE RISE AND FALL OF THE TYEWERETYE CLUB

LWA focused on changing drinking styles—reining in and transforming the big-drinking Territory culture to a less damaging drinking style: the Tyweretye Club fitted with this aim. Chief Minister Marshall Perron and Dr Shirley Hendy, Director of LWA, offered in-principle support for Aboriginal social clubs, provided their conditions benefited communities.¹⁵ Both sides of politics supported the Tyweretye Club.¹⁶ The deputy commissioner of police and the Aboriginal health service in Alice Springs were also supportive, as were several prominent Aboriginal people including, Geoff Shaw, Lutheran pastor Eli Rubuntja, Pat Turner and Betty Pearce. Charles Perkins, an advocate of Aboriginal-owned licensed clubs, gave early assistance to the Tangentyere Liquor Committee in the form of a DAA grant to help with consultations.¹⁷



Fig. 17 'Drink Less for Your Family', Living with Alcohol banner

Source: M Brady

15 Dr Shirley Hendy, pers comm, 13 August 2009.

16 On the Labor side, local members Neil Bell, Peter Toyne and Brian Ede were supportive, as was Dr Richard Lim, the CLP member for the electorate of Greatorex, which is where the club was eventually located.

17 Brady fieldnotes, Bill Ferguson, pers comm, 6 August 2008.

However, the harm-reduction model was unpopular among advocates of abstinence, such as Aboriginal sobriety groups, supporters of AA and some Aboriginal women's groups. Believers in abstinence usually reject the notion that 'alcoholics' can ever learn to drink in moderation (cf. Brady 2004: 69–73), and some opposition to the club was ferocious. Unusually, the Liquor Commission,¹⁸ then chaired by Kelvin Rae, was opposed to the club. Prominent Aboriginal ATSIC commissioner Alison Hunt also spoke out against the club, as did Alison Anderson, chair of Papunya Council, and Aboriginal actor and activist Rosalie Kunoth-Monks. Some Aboriginal women from town camps on the south side of town also objected. The Alice Springs Town Council was against the club.¹⁹ By far the most organised opposition to the idea of a licensed Aboriginal club in Alice Springs came from Aboriginal women beyond Alice Springs: the Ngaanyatjarra, Pitjantjatjara, Yankunytjatjara (NPY) Women's Council, and the women of other regional communities, such as Hermannsburg. In an unlikely alliance, the NPY Women's Council and the Liquor Commission managed to prevent the Tyeweretye Club from obtaining a liquor licence for over two years.

The Northern Territory Country Liberal Party (CLP), then in government, supported the club. Hoping that it would help to minimise violence and alcohol problems in Alice Springs (Bottrall 1990: 3), it granted Tangentyere Council 5 ha of relatively rural land, south of the town through Heavitree Gap and near the Little Sisters town camp. The site was Tangentyere's third choice (out of 16 potential sites); in the end, only one club was built, with a \$250,000 loan from the ADC (which was later taken over by ATSIC).

The struggle to get licensed

The Tyeweretye Club submitted its first application for a licence to sell the full range of liquor in August 1990. Three months later, the Liquor Commission refused the application, citing the objections of respondents who had had negative experiences of community clubs (Tangentyere Council 1991: 95).²⁰ By this time, the club had been built and was open,

18 Then known as the Liquor, Racing and Gaming Commission.

19 The Alice Springs Town Council, at the time and since, has supported 'canteens' and clubs for Aboriginal people, but only if they are in bush communities, away from the town.

20 Racing, Gaming and Liquor Commission, Northern Territory, Liquor Division, Tyeweretye Club Incorporated Public Hearing, 21–23 August 1990.

but was only selling non-alcoholic drinks, prompting the headline: ‘Pub with no beer offers hope’—which referred to the manager’s ambitions for educating future customers towards moderate drinking (Simper 1991: 4).

In May 1991, a second application was submitted to the Liquor Commission, this time for a beer-only licence.²¹ Ten months later, this application was also rejected, the Liquor Commission stating that it was concerned about the club’s financial capacity. However, the decision was also influenced by opposition to the club voiced by Aboriginal women from remote communities in central Australia. These objectors thought it wrong for Aboriginal people to ‘involve themselves in the sale of liquor to other Aboriginals’, as they might perceive that ‘it is quite in order for liquor to be consumed to varying levels of intoxication *because it is being supplied by Aboriginals*’ (Northern Territory Liquor Commission 1997: 2, emphasis added). The Liquor Commission determined that, even though these objectors lived some distance from Alice Springs, they were part of the ‘community’ whose views needed to be considered, and it concluded that the ‘needs and wishes’ of the community were unfavourable to the club licence. Having previously ignored the needs and wishes—and consistent petitioning—of these traditional women over the issue of roadside takeaway licences, the Liquor Commission was perverse in taking account of their views on this occasion.

In a submission to a Race Discrimination Commission inquiry, Tangentyere Council mounted a spirited attack on the Liquor Commission’s rejection of its application for an on-premises licence. Seeking to demonstrate the Liquor Commission’s mishandling of Aboriginal alcohol-management issues, it cited three recent examples: indifference to the growing problems of the Murrinh Patha Social Club at Wadeye (described in Chapter 4); unresponsiveness to proposals put forward by the Imanpa – Mt Ebenezer community (to establish a community club, to upgrade policing and to resist takeaway applications from local outlets); and current rejection of the Tyeweretye Club’s licence application. This rejection, Tangentyere Council claimed, exposed the Liquor Commission’s preference for ‘mediating judicial combat rather than contributing to a major project in alcohol rehabilitation’. Tangentyere Council asserted that, when turning down the licence application, the Liquor Commission had made no attempt to discuss the merits of the club’s educational influence (i.e. in teaching

21 Supporters of this application included Geoffrey Shaw of Tangentyere Council, the police, a local MLA and Elliott Johnson QC, head of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody.

moderation); it had not investigated how the club dovetailed with other local programs and strategies; and had not considered the needs of fully employed Aboriginal people, some with tertiary qualifications, who had no 'congenial and non-racist' place to drink, or the needs of 'controlled' drinkers who wished to avoid the predations of their drunken relatives (Tangentyere Council 1991: 96).

Later, after thoughtfully analysing the Liquor Commission's policy, Tangentyere Council appealed the Liquor Commission's decision in the Northern Territory Supreme Court. Their appeal was successful. In March 1992, Justice Sally Thomas quashed the Commission's decision to refuse the licence, stating that the Liquor Commission had presented no evidence to back up its claim that the club lacked financial skills. She found that the views of Aboriginal women in remote communities were not shared by residents in Alice Springs,²² and argued that the 'community' whose views mattered most was the community of people living or working within the township of Alice Springs (Northern Territory Liquor Commission 1997: 3). In a further rebuke, the Race Discrimination Commissioner commented that the Liquor Commission's earlier 'unreasonable' objection to the club was potentially discriminatory (Race Discrimination Commissioner 1995: 34). In 1993, the Chief Minister dismissed the incumbent Liquor Commissioner.²³ In March that year, the Liquor Commission—with different members, a new mission statement and policy direction, and new chairman—reconsidered the second application and granted the Tyeweretye Club a beer-only licence.

Putting in-house strategies in place

To allow time to conduct induction workshops, the Tyeweretye Club refrained from selling beer for six months after the licence was granted. The workshops sought to educate board members, most of whom were drinkers, about the rules of the Liquor Act as they applied to drinking on licensed premises. According to club manager Bill Ferguson, board members had been ignorant of the law, and of the expectations of behaviour on licensed premises. Ferguson recalled that some club members were shocked to discover that patrons who were clearly drunk

22 *Centralian Advocate* 30 March 1995: 3.

23 Kelvin Rae was removed; Marshall Perron appointed John Maley to the position in March 1993 (*Centralian Advocate* 1993b: 3).

could not be served more alcohol. This had not been their experience in other licensed premises, and many had only ever consumed takeaway alcohol in the scrub around Alice Springs.²⁴ Ferguson recalled how the rules and regulations of the club were translated into different languages and played over loudspeakers in the club 'so people could learn'. The club also advertised its rules on local television. Having had minimal formal education, and no training in responsible service or management, Ferguson learned the rules by reading the Liquor Act: 'I had to use my head', he said.

The club's constitution was unequivocal (if rather ambitious) about its aims, which were to alleviate the effects of social disadvantage, deprivation and cultural loss by:

Establishing, operating and maintaining [licensed] Aboriginal social clubs at which Aboriginal people may consume alcohol in a controlled environment, enhanced by the provision of ancillary services ... designed to promote a more enlightened attitude to the issue of alcohol and Aboriginal people and/or to mitigate the social damage occasioned by alcohol abuse in the Alice Springs community and surrounding areas of Central Australia. (Tyeweretye Constitution 1999: 3)

Club management put in place a number of policies designed to moderate people's intake and create a pleasant social environment. Food was always available, and there were self-service barbecues for people to cook meat purchased from the club. There was a mini-mart where people could exchange food vouchers,²⁵ and people could buy frozen kangaroo tails and pre-packed meats. Groups of women and children often came early for breakfast, and there was no pressure on people to drink alcohol. The dress rules were not too strict and bare feet were allowed; this was different from other clubs and hotels, where, as one customer explained, you had to 'dress up like white people'.²⁶ There was a comfortable grassed area outside the club, a bandstand and beer garden, a pool table and jukebox, and bingo games and raffles. There were six poker machines, but these were

24 The Tyeweretye Club continued to hold 'educational' meetings with its members; for example, in 1998, there were sessions about the operation of the Two Kilometre Law at which it was discovered that the majority of members were unaware that drinking within 2 km of a liquor outlet was unlawful: 'How far was 2 km?' The Two Kilometre Law had been in force since 1982 (Tangentyere Council 1998).

25 Tangentyere Council had its own form of voluntary income management in which people signed on through Centrelink for a food voucher system. The system was put in place over 25 years ago by senior town camp residents. www.tangentyere.org.au/services/finance/food_voucher/ [accessed 29 July 2014].

26 Jackie Okai's evidence (Northern Territory Liquor Commission 1997: 9).

rarely used and were eventually sold. Initially, the licence allowed for sales of beer only, and beers were sold in opened cans. The club encouraged people to drink light beer (which was half the price of 'heavy' beer). Club policy was to close on big entertainment days in Alice Springs, such as the Camel Cup or the Rodeo, as these events had their own special short-term licences. Friday night was band night; on these nights, the club would close at 3 pm to allow a four-hour break before the concert. Tickets cost \$10 and between 250 and 300 people usually attended. The club made valiant efforts to prevent trouble among its clientele; on band nights, for example, only low-alcohol beer was sold from 9 pm until midnight. One staff member reported:

If a donnybrooks²⁷ started up in the congregation in the club, they'd sort it out. We had concerts and had security at the gate with Aboriginal men and women security. We had one incident (a stabbing) outside the club in ten years.²⁸

Another staff member recalled:

There was a music stage, invited bands to come and play, not to make money but to give people what they couldn't get in town. But a rag-tag mob tried to get in and made trouble outside the gates and the media got onto it. At one time we employed three full-time properly accredited security people to take weapons off people and they removed any drunk and disorderly.²⁹

Club members signed in at the front gate, and security workers would search people for alcohol and weapons. This was evidently required, as sometimes women tried to enter the club with cask bladders in their bras, and men with injuries tried to hide bottles in their plaster casts. Ferguson could remember only one incident on a Friday night when the police were called; however, the police and the night patrol were frequently called to attend to disputes among people gathered *outside* the club. Strict adherence to the liquor regulations (in the form of refusing service to and evicting intoxicated people) often created problems at the gate, partly because many drinkers had not been socialised into the behaviours expected of them, and did not understand why they were being refused service. This level of ignorance was a reflection (and indictment) of the serving practices that Aboriginal people had become accustomed to at

27 'Donnybrooks' = brawl, fracas.

28 Bill Ferguson, pers comm, 6 August 2008.

29 Gordon Fawcett, pers comm, 7 August 2008.

the few remaining Alice Springs bars frequented by Aboriginal people, particularly the (insultingly named) ‘animal bar’ at the Riverside Tavern, which evidently rarely enforced the law.



Fig. 18 Tyeweretye Clubs billboard

Source: M Brady

The challenges of running the club

The manager, a non-Aboriginal man, ran the bar with the help of a barman, a position that, for many years, was held by a Maori man. Non-Aboriginal club officials reported that it was impossible for Aboriginal men to work behind the bar; predictably, they found it difficult when their relations demanded free grog. The manager kept a close eye on supplies and the till. Nevertheless, as with all such ventures, critics suggested that the rules were occasionally bent, as the manager ‘didn’t know how to say “no”’, and committee members were ‘bought off’ with alcohol.

The Tyeweretye Club had to deal with challenges and social issues that lay beyond, as well as on, its premises. An ongoing and difficult problem to manage concerned the habit many club patrons had of walking on, or across, a railway line that, unfortunately, was located near the club's front entrance. After several deaths involving freight trains, the national rail authority was forced to come up with better warning systems in consultation with Tangentyere Council. Another challenge was the press of people attracted to the general area of the club on band nights, who brought takeaway supplies, purchased elsewhere, to drink on the vacant land near the club. This allowed people to be part of the 'action' without entering the premises. Among those who entered the club were some who left their children waiting outside in parked vehicles. The club acted as a magnet to Aboriginal people who had nowhere else to go, and the manager frequently had to call the police and the Tangentyere night patrol:³⁰

[He] often rings ambulances for people outside the front of the Club, but ambulances have only very occasionally attended for persons inside the Club, for cases of medical emergencies ... people outside the Club on a Friday night organise their own liquor supplies. Each Saturday morning [the manager] cleans up rubbish from outside the Club premises ... [That Saturday] he picked up ninety empty wine casks, together with many empty bottles of spirits. (Northern Territory Liquor Commission 1997: 6)

Data from the Alice Springs sobering-up shelter showed that, while people were picked up intoxicated from the club area, the numbers were small in comparison to the number of people brought to the shelter who had been picked up from the Todd River bed (Gaff et al. 1997).

Despite all the social activities (e.g. band nights and barbeques), by 1997 (just four years after it was licensed), the club's alcohol trade was in decline, primarily because of competition presented by cheap takeaways, and the easing of restrictions on sales of 4 L wine casks. By the late 1990s, the club averaged around 30 customers a day, with trading usually confined to two hours in the morning: around lunchtime, most drinkers left for the takeaway outlets.³¹

30 The sources for this information include Peter Toyne (Minister for Central Australia in the 1990s); Chris McIntyre (Licensing and Regulation, Liquor Commission); Bill Ferguson (club manager); and Gordon Fawcett (club accountant).

31 The three takeaway outlets mentioned were the Heavitree Gap Hotel store, Piggly Wiggly (licensed supermarket) and BP (licensed roadhouse) (Northern Territory Liquor Commission 1997).

The Tyeweretye Club suffered the unintended effects of a series of genuine attempts to ameliorate the high levels of alcohol-related harm in the town. Trial periods of reduced trading hours and experiments in the types of alcohol sold negatively affected the club, as Bill Ferguson (2003: 87) explained:

The Northern Territory Liquor Commission introduced restrictive trading hours for take-away outlets, Clubs and Hotels. The only alcohol sales permitted on licensed premises were light beer from 10 am and full-strength beer from 11.30 am. Our experiences have shown that this was not a real success. The patrons only waited around playing pool and watching television until 11.30 am when full beer sales were permitted. The experience of the Tyeweretye is that an organisation without take-away facilities has only a 'True Trading Time' of 11.30 am to 1.45 pm. There is a mass exodus from 1.30 pm onwards to the licensed take-away facilities.

In an attempt to stem this flow and improve the club's viability, management applied for a variation to the licence to allow sales of the full range of alcoholic drinks, not just beer, and Sunday trading. They hoped that if patrons had a choice of drinks, they would stay longer. Despite open discussion of the clubs' travails at the licence-variation hearing, the Liquor Commission accepted the 'sociological rationale' for the application. It heard evidence that the club had proved itself capable of controlling drinking; that it was a viable alternative to sitting in the riverbed with takeaway Coolibah;³² and that Sunday trading would 'lessen ... the swilling congregation' at the two takeaway outlets open in town (Northern Territory Liquor Commission 1997: 25). The club's 'only real problem' was the crowd of people who gathered outside the gates on Friday nights. In March 1997, the Liquor Commission granted the licence variation along with a trial period of extended trading hours on Sundays from 10 am to 6 pm. Customers welcomed the change, stating 'now we got a *real* pub'; a few club members switched to spirits, with young women drinking pre-mixed spirits (also known as alco-pops or UDLs).³³

32 Coolibah = a popular cheap white cask wine.

33 It is worth noting that the type of liquor one drinks can be a key component of social identity and a source of prestige—or debasement (Collmann 1988, Sansom 1980).

Not only cheap takeaways threatened the club's viability: other commercial outlets also actively poached the club's customers. One hotel³⁴ in the vicinity of the Tyeweretye Club opened a new bar that was overtly designed to attract an Aboriginal clientele. Another hotel, which had previously been unwelcoming to Aboriginal customers, changed ownership, and the new management drew Tyeweretye's customers away by giving out stubby coolers, hats and putting on barbecues. The hotel also had a TAB, Sky and takeaways, all of which were attractive to Aboriginal customers; it even copied the Tyeweretye Club's idea of having Aboriginal bands play on premises. Local politician Peter Toyne, a supporter of the Tyeweretye Club from the beginning, described this competition as a 'grog war' (Chlanda 1998).

With the Tyeweretye Club doing no better in terms of customers and revenue, despite having a full range of alcohol on sale, in desperation, the club decided to apply for a takeaway licence in 1998; predictably, the move caused a furore. Tangentyere Council, the organisation that had sponsored the club, had objected to all new takeaway licences in Alice Springs as a matter of policy and principle over the previous 15 years. The club itself had argued that, by providing a particular social and cultural environment together with community-instigated rules of conduct for drinking on licensed premises, it was creating something special, not just another booze outlet to add to the already crowded market in Alice Springs. Club proponents had successfully used these arguments to fend off considerable opposition from women's groups and the abstinence treatment lobby. The commercial argument, that providing takeaway sales would enable the club to survive, was not enough; the club's application for a takeaway licence sparked a 'political war of words'. Prominent politicians, spokespersons and organisations, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, took sides and voiced their opinions. In favour of the takeaway application were Labor politicians Maggie Hickey and Peter Toyne, who said that it would allow the club to compete with other liquor outlets for business, and that it was a necessary part of the future viability of the club (*Centralian Advocate* 1998a: 2, 1998b: 5). Toyne knew that the club owed \$250,000 to ATSIC, which was not disposed to forgive the loan.

34 The Queen of the Desert Hotel.

The Alice Springs Town Council opposed the licence application. The mayor was against another takeaway licence in the town; if the club was in financial difficulties, he argued that it should approach ATSIC or LWA for help. As a health provider, the CAAC (or Congress) formally objected to the application, arguing that a takeaway licence would adversely affect women and children, cause more deaths, and contravene the club's philosophy as well as its goal of educating the Aboriginal community in responsible drinking (*Centralian Advocate* 1998c: 8). The club applied for a takeaway licence again in February 1999, but the hearing was abandoned when objectors discovered that the club's own constitution barred it from holding a licence to sell packaged alcohol (Kuilboer 1999: 13). The club suffered a loss of moral credibility in the eyes of its supporters; its repeated attempts to obtain a takeaway licence to save it financially—indeed, for the whole project to survive—was the final straw for those who had wavered in their support for the club. In April 2005, the club's licence was suspended, and in 2010, it was cancelled (Department of Justice 2010).

Analysing the demise of the club

The club's manager and key proponent, Bill Ferguson, explained the club's demise in a few simple words: 'there was too much opposition'. There is no doubt that the club was highly contentious, but it was also more than this. The club crystallised and brought to a head a long-term ideological split that had begun to form in the 1970s³⁵ between drinkers and non-drinkers in the Aboriginal community—the wets and the dries: between those who thought it was possible to 'live with alcohol' and those who were convinced that complete sobriety was the only route. More than individual diversity accounted for the differences of opinion among Aboriginal people; Aboriginal people's positioning on these matters determined the organisations they worked for, the strategies and policies those organisations supported, and their attitudes to the entire Northern Territory Government and its programs and initiatives, such as the LWA program.

35 See Aboriginal submissions to the House of Representatives inquiry into Aboriginal alcohol problems in 1976 and 1977 (Brady 2004: 59, Peele 1993).

Philosophical differences

Members of the Tangentyere Liquor Committee started to pull in different directions quite early on. The committee had originally comprised a mix of drinkers *and* non-drinkers, and these individuals became increasingly at odds with one another. In 1989, a non-drinking member of the committee, Doug Abbott, started the first Aboriginal Alcoholics Anonymous (AAA) group. This group grew into CAAAPU, an abstinence-oriented community-controlled residential treatment program (Lyon 1990: 110, Rowse 1996).³⁶ Conversely, the chair of the committee, Bill Ferguson, was the person who became the club's manager. Ferguson was a drinker; he was also experienced in the running of hotels, having previously managed the Finke Hotel. One non-drinking member described the committee's split:

We started together ... Bill pulled away from us. They tried to get people teach 'em how to drink. Can't teach people to drink! Can't be both ways same time. How can we counsel anyone when you still drinking? ... I break off from there [to work at CAAAPU]. A tug of war. Trying to pull this way to keep sober and Bill pulling the other way to keep them drunk!³⁷

A Tangentyere Council spokesperson tried to deflate the significance of this ideological split, stating:

Our organisation was the founding organisation for two models. The CAAAPU model is a total abstinence model. That came from the Tangentyere alcohol committee. The other option we have is to learn to live with alcohol so, out of that alcohol committee, came the formation of an Aboriginal social club called the Tyweretye Club. (Tilmouth 2001: 17)

36 This informal group was renamed Aboriginal Alcohol Awareness (AAA) after the official Alcoholics Anonymous organisation objected to the original name. AAA was originally supportive of moderation messages, but later toughened its position to promote abstinence. On CAAAPU see Rowse 1996.

37 Brady fieldnotes, 6 May 2009. Indeed, Tangentyere Council (1991) pushed for the club *and* it continued to support the AAA group (28). As Paul Spicer (1997) pointed out with respect to Native Americans, this epitomises the profound ambivalence within Aboriginal thinking about drinking. He wrote that Native American drinkers do not exemplify one opinion about drinking: 'Instead, their attitude is a product of the tension between two mutually incompatible positions: those that favour alcohol use and those that condemn it' (317). They recognise that alcohol can be used to demonstrate the core cultural values of sharing and relating with kin, but they also vilify it as an alien and degrading influence.

This division created defensiveness on both sides, especially between the AAA people, who eventually became counsellors at CAAAPU, and the individuals associated with the club. When CAAAPU workers visited the club to see what was going on—what sort of place it was—they encountered resistance: they felt that club staff were uninterested in providing CAAAPU contact information to customers. There is no doubt that, rightly or wrongly, the club became associated with the Northern Territory Government's sensible drinking campaign: the LWA program. In fact, proponents of the club sometimes seemed to have adopted the program's slogan. One stated:

You can't get rid of grog. You gotta learn to live with grog. If we can learn those things, we can learn to live with alcohol, no reason why not.

Similarly, another supporter of the club remarked:

Teaching people to *live with alcohol* was the main objective [of the club]. There was a split in views between the 'no alcohol' people and the 'Living with Alcohol' type of thinking'. (emphasis added)

The fact that the Northern Territory Government's LWA program supported the club merely reinforced the negative attitudes of those who believed that moderate consumption was neither possible, nor desirable for Aboriginal people.³⁸ Even the Race Discrimination Commissioner (1995: 33) cautioned that the policy of moderation espoused by the LWA program 'should not be imposed indiscriminately on all Aboriginal communities'. In truth, LWA stressed that there were drinking *choices* available to Aboriginal people other than being either a (heavy) 'drinker' or an abstinent 'non-drinker'.

In the region as a whole, the pro-abstinence, anti-moderation position was boosted between 1991 and 1993 by the arrival in Alice Springs of First Nations abstinence-oriented alcohol-treatment activists from Canada. Several of these charismatic indigenous treatment entrepreneurs spoke at conferences, networked with Aboriginal organisations and lobbied government officials, stressing the need for sobriety, supporting AA-style approaches and condemning harm-reduction policies (Brady 2004, Rowse

38 Such thinking is prevalent among Native Americans who often also assert that there is no way their people could drink 'like a Whiteman' in a moderate way (Spicer 1997: 307).

1996). The arrival of the Canadians reinforced the existing divergence of views about the nature of drinking problems and the best way to manage them; there is no doubt that they contributed to opposition to the club.

**Gurrum'thun ŋunhi yurru ŋanitji-ŋatha manapan luka,
manymaktja rom ŋilimurrungu.**

These people are drinking safe amounts of grog and eating food while they drink. The kids have plenty of food.



**Gurrum'thunmirri ŋilimurrunguway ŋilimurru ga bulu
djammarrkujiwu, djaka walalangu ga wirrki wekama ŋathayu
walalanha.**

This is a careful way to drink grog.

Fig. 19 'These people are drinking safe amounts of grog'

Source: Living with Alcohol responsible drinking resource from northeast Arnhem Land

In addition to these stresses (i.e. internal fissures, growing antipathy towards the LWA program and the arrival of the Canadians), the club faced opposition from a new Aboriginal women's temperance movement in Alice Springs. Women demonstrated in public to protest the uncontrolled sales of takeaway alcohol and the devastating effects alcohol was having on their families, and they campaigned vigorously against the opening of any further outlets for liquor.³⁹ The movement, which had begun in bush communities, had been gathering momentum over several years. It commenced in 1988, when women of the Pitjantjatjara region southwest of Alice Springs objected to the renewal of a takeaway licence for the Curtin Springs Roadhouse, which sold alcohol to Aboriginal

³⁹ The Northern Territory, at the time, had more liquor outlets per capita than any other state or territory in Australia, and Alice Springs had 37 per cent more liquor outlets per capita than the rest of the Northern Territory, 19 of which had takeaway licences (Coughlan 1991: 151).

people returning to bush communities.⁴⁰ In July 1990, with no progress on their complaints, the women marched and demonstrated outside the roadhouse. In mid-1990, there was a large, and much publicised, ‘walk against grog’ through the streets of Alice Springs, involving hundreds of Pitjantjatjara, Warlpiri and Arrernte people from five remote communities. Organised largely by prominent local woman Rosalie Kunoth-Monks, contingents of traditional women walked bare-breasted, ‘painted up’ and wearing feather and hair-string headbands (Schulz 1990: 3). Although Kunoth-Monks was reported as saying that this ‘declaration of war on grog’ was aimed at visitors from the bush who came to town to drink and lived in the riverbed, she was known to oppose the Tyeweretye Club; the march took place within months of the club’s first licence application. In March 1993—in the same month as the Liquor Commission was reconsidering the Tyeweretye Club’s licence application—30 women from Hermannsburg marched on a delicatessen in Alice Springs in opposition to its licence. When they heard that the Tyeweretye Club had been granted a licence, several Hermannsburg women⁴¹ picketed the venue to show their displeasure:

We are very, very sad about the grog problems. The Tyeweretye Club will mean trouble for our families. It will bring death ... We want grog shops to stop selling alcohol to Aborigines but now they have opened a club especially to sell grog to Aboriginal people. It is wrong ... and a waste of Government money and Aboriginal land. (Tondorf 1993a: 2)

Bill Ferguson invited the women in for a tour of the premises and answered their questions. One month later, on 23 April 1993, Aboriginal women from Hermannsburg, Papunya and Yuendumu held another big anti-grog march through the streets of Alice Springs.⁴² Like members of the WCTU in the nineteenth century, the Aboriginal women placed banner-holding children (‘No grog in delis’ and ‘Save our people. No grog’) at the head of their demonstration. The anti-grog campaigners were joined

40 The objections to Curtin Springs were heard before Kelvin Rae (Chairman of the Liquor Commission), 22–24 November 1988 and 14–16 February 1989 in Alice Springs. Objectors were Maggie Kavanagh, the Pitjantjatjara Council Inc. and Mutitjulu Community Inc. The objections were overcharging, failure to follow an informal agreement and selling to people travelling to dry communities. They were dismissed as being ‘marginal’, ‘hearsay’ and because of uncertainty over the definition of ‘the needs and wishes of the community’. It took nine years of complaints, lobbying and a colonial inquest into five deaths before an agreement was reached for trials of restrictions on takeaway sales in 1997.

41 The Hermannsburg women were led by Mavis Malbunka.

42 This march was organised by Koorine Williams from Hermannsburg.

by women from the Yuendumu night patrol (Tondorf 1993b: 3). This mobilisation against alcohol in the form of pickets and marches was, in effect, an uprising by Aboriginal women asserting their right to speak out about domestic violence, alcohol-related homicides and the welfare of their children and future generations (McGrath 1993).⁴³ Such a level of ferment over alcohol was unprecedented and, to some extent, incidental to plans for the Tyeweretye Club. However, some supporters of the club believed that anti-grog campaigners had been responsible for quashing the original plan for four Aboriginal clubs. Certainly, after the grog marches had taken place, several previously supportive agencies and organisations 'washed their hands' of the club. As the club's accountant explained: 'The anti-grog movement came in and they dropped us like a hot potato'.



Fig. 20 Women Against Alcohol march, Alice Springs, 1990

Source: S Strike

43 Nineteenth-century WCTU members, members of the United States Anti-Saloon League and evangelical reformers all used the effect of drinking on women and children as ammunition in their campaigns, as did the Aboriginal women of central Australia (Grimshaw 1999).

The meaning of drinking

Another huge difficulty for the club was that it tried to tackle an inherently wicked and probably insoluble problem: changing the drinking styles of people who were thoroughly unversed in drinking on licensed premises and whose normal practice was to aim for intoxication. For some Aboriginal people, drinking to intoxication was an expression of personal power: for others, it was simply normative and had become habitual (Collmann 1979, cf. Room 1992).

A country-club style hotel–casino opened in Alice Springs in 1981. Redeveloped as Lasseter’s Casino in 1986, this glitzy venue (rather than the Tyeweretye Club) attracted many middle-class Aboriginal locals. In making a case for the club’s establishment, Tangentyere Council had argued that tertiary educated and employed Aboriginal residents needed a ‘non-racist’ setting in which to drink; however, the bulk of drinkers the club hoped to attract were people who had spent a lifetime drinking in the open, in the Todd River or the town camps. Before they switched to cask wine, many of these people were port, sweet sherry and methylated spirits drinkers. Anthropologist Jeff Collmann lived in a town camp in the 1970s; he observed that most town camp people drank ‘what is often considered (even by Northern Territory standards) an extraordinary amount of liquor’ (1979: 209, 1988).⁴⁴ In the 1980s, the camps were largely violent, insular and lawless places without regular police patrols, despite the fact that residents included some non-drinkers and others whose drinking varied along a continuum from regular (moderate) to heavy (bingeing) (Collmann 1979, O’Connor 1983: 5, Jane Lloyd, pers comm).⁴⁵ Tyeweretye Club patrons who came from the south-side camps, near the club, were primarily made up of desert people (i.e. Luritja, Pitjantjatjara and Warlpiri) who had had relatively little exposure to, or experience of, alcohol (Stead 1980). They had not worked in the pastoral industry that, for some Aboriginal people, provided their (relatively controlled) introduction to alcohol. Their experience of drinking on licensed premises was confined to one or two rough, usually segregated, bars at roadside inns or in Alice Springs hotels.

44 Even when the club was operating, the Alice Springs police reported that they took 13,000 people a year into protective custody who were intoxicated in public, and that the extent of public drunkenness was beyond their capacity and function (Northern Territory Liquor Commission 1997: 21).

45 The Tangentyere Liquor Committee would have liked to declare the town camps as dry areas under existing Northern Territory Dry Area legislation, but this was thought to be ‘too hard’ because of the impossibility of policing such an arrangement (Ferguson 2003: 86). Town camps were eventually declared dry under the NTER provisions in 2007.



Fig. 21 Empty wine casks and liquor bottles (sold by one outlet) collected from drinking spots in the Todd River bed, 2012

Source: People's Alcohol Action Coalition, Alice Springs

The Tyeweretye Club was at a distinct disadvantage. Like all on-licences, it was unable to compete with the off-licences that provided Aboriginal people with takeaway alcohol. More specifically, it was unable to fulfil the needs of Aboriginal people who placed a high social and cultural value on the exchanges and interchanges that were made possible by takeaway alcohol. The bulk nature of takeaway alcohol (in cans, bottles or casks) makes it a *malleable* commodity, allowing it to become a form of symbolic capital through which people make and remake their social world. This dense network of sociality and exchange is essential to people's sense of self (Peterson 2013). As a fluid, liquor can be divided into different amounts and shared in different ways—from a communal cup, by the gift of a bottle, or a swig from a flagon or cask: something that is not so easily achieved when drinking at a club or bar. Local historian Dick Kimber, although he did not drink himself, used to sit with Aboriginal friends who were drinkers. He recalled:

You'd get 20 'it makes you happy' [was what they said]. You'd make the most of what you got.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Dick Kimber, pers comm, 1 August 2008.

According to Collmann (1979), liquor was a form of credit for town campers: it involved the ‘entire social universe’ of the town camp in which he lived. Alcohol, like other commodities, has become part of what Peterson (2013) has termed ‘demand sharing’—that is, the pattern of informal sharing in which acting generously commonly takes place in response to demands. As well as being easily shared, takeaway alcohol allows for greater spatial flexibility, as drinkers can recruit and maintain their companions and co-drinkers and locate them spatially in the landscape in a manner that is not possible on licensed premises, no matter how extensive a beer garden might be (Sansom 1980, Brady 2010).

Losing the competition war

While the Tyeweretye Club tried to enact some corporate social responsibility by serving low-alcohol beer and closing for a few hours on band nights, the other, more competitive commercial outlets, ignored such niceties, commonly engaging in unscrupulous sales tactics. Some of these were exposed in 1993 when the government was forced to amend the Liquor Act to curb happy hours that lasted longer than two hours; ban the selling of ‘buy-one get-one free’ drinks; prevent hoteliers from offering all the liquor a person could consume for a set fee; ban drinking competitions; and prevent hotels from providing ticketing or other discounting mechanisms. All these deplorable practices had become normal in Northern Territory hotels; when they were banned, the Hoteliers Association called the new regulations ‘bloody ridiculous’ (*Centralian Advocate* 1993a: 3).

Meanwhile, the Tyeweretye Club’s light-beer initiatives were unsuccessful and unpopular; club members did not drink it, even though it cost half the price of full-strength beer. According to the *Centralian Advocate* (18 April 1997: 3):

The club did all the right things: it sold beer only, had entertainment at the weekends, security guards, BBQs and meat plates, grassy areas, and Aboriginal ownership. But it slowly lost money and was forced to extend trading hours and sell wines and spirits. They had argued that it was better for people to drink in a controlled area rather than in public.

Ferguson spoke in similar terms about the club's efforts to trial different opening hours:

We tried for one year opening from 4 pm to see if we could draw people in. But no-one came. By that time, they'd have [had] a fairly good fill. We got big numbers in the early days and they stayed longer, even though the bottle shops were open, but we realised we had to have a shut-down time, or else a drunken mess around me. So about 3 pm we had a shut down. But once people left, they'd never come back.⁴⁷

The availability of cheap takeaways, and the unashamedly profit-driven marketing strategies of nearby hotels, made the club unviable. This had been a danger from the beginning; the year the club opened, the Gapview Hotel drive-in bottle shop was selling 4 L casks of Kaiser Stuhl Riesling for \$8.45, and a carton of Territory Bitter beer for \$16.95 (*Centralian Advocate* 4 May 1993: 9). Customers abandoned the Tyeweretye Club en masse once the takeaway outlets opened at around midday or early afternoon. As mentioned, it was not just the lure of takeaway liquor that drew customers away; one nearby hotel put on live Aboriginal bands and set up a bar overtly designed for Aboriginal drinkers to attract on-premises sales.

The club had not become embedded in people's lives as a social and community centre—a regular drinking spot. Instead, the club became a venue for 'pre-loading'. In a reversal of the widespread practice in which young urban (non-Aboriginal) Australians engage in pre-drinking at home prior to a night out clubbing, Aboriginal drinkers used the Tyeweretye Club to whet their appetites before heading off to the takeaway outlets, after which the 'real' drinking began (Wells et al. 2009, Brady 2010).

A business or a social enterprise?

Originally, the club's proponents and management committee had hoped that it would become a community hub, providing services, training programs and rehabilitation for drinkers. There were also plans for a sporting complex on the property. According to the manager, there were even hopes that income from the club could be used to:

Sponsor people to go to a better school or through Uni, but we never made enough to do that. Early days [we had] a turnover of \$10,000 per week, then \$2000. We had six pokies but didn't make anything out of them.

⁴⁷ Bill Ferguson, pers comm.

The poker machines that KMG thought would produce \$70,000 a year were hardly used. This was probably because, rather than winning cash, poker-machine players won credits that could be redeemed at the shop with vouchers. Most mainstream clubs, such as RSL clubs or sporting clubs, would not survive without the income from poker machines.⁴⁸ The Tyeweretye Club's income from food sales also dropped dramatically from 1997, because another Tangentyere Council business became the designated outlet for the exchange of food vouchers.⁴⁹

The club's accountant described Tyeweretye as a 'mutual club', in the sense that its profits were for the benefit of members as a whole; indeed, the club's constitution stated that any profits would be applied 'in promotion of its objectives'.⁵⁰ The club was intended as a social enterprise, acting for the good of its constituents and members, rather than solely as a money-making enterprise, which is somewhat in the spirit of the community-owned, or Gothenburg-style, hotels discussed in earlier chapters. Yet, ATSIIC expected the club to make enough money to repay its loan, and gave it little leeway. The accountants had optimistically predicted that the club would be self-funding, but the reality was that without ongoing outside support, it struggled to survive. Once the club was built and furnished, it received no further financial support. According to the club's accountant:

There were no subsidies. We had to stand on our own two feet. One million to build and equip it—as good a club as you'd get anywhere. We had \$200,000 left as a loan that had to be repaid over the five-year lease time at 10 per cent interest. The loan was a 'mortgage' on the five-year lease. But we only had a five-year lease and limited sales.

Running the club, and making it profitable while honouring its commitment to safe and moderate drinking, was a much more difficult proposition than had been anticipated by the sponsoring organisation, Tangentyere Council. Tangentyere had its own governance problems. Its periodic changes in direction and governance affected the club and diminished the level of both tangible and ideological support. The club's manager and principals needed more professional guidance and better

48 Chris McIntyre, Liquor Commission, pers comm, 8 August 2008.

49 Tangentyere Council bought a supermarket that included a liquor department, representing a reversal of its earlier policy on takeaway licences, and changing the arrangements for Tangentyere-issued food vouchers.

50 The Constitution reads: '21.2. Profits, if any, and other income of Tyeweretye shall be applied in promotion of its objectives. Dividends shall not be paid to, nor profits, income or property of Tyeweretye be distributed amongst members. 21.3. No member shall be entitled to derive any profit, benefit of advantage from Tyeweretye which is not available to every member'.

management training, but no government or non-government agency provided any follow-up support or advice, and none had the capacity to do so. The Liquor Commission dealt only with compliance issues; the government health department and the LWA program had limited practical involvement with the club. In a sense, uncertainty within government about whether the club was meant to be a business or a social enterprise (an exercise in alcohol harm reduction, or even health promotion), was a key factor in its demise.

After defaulting on its start-up loan in 2005, the club closed its doors. The club needed to generate around \$100,000 per year to survive; it was driven to make the controversial application for a takeaway licence purely out of economic need—it had no interest in having such a licence beyond a financial one. A local politician who believed in the club and wanted it to survive articulated what she saw as the key question:

The issues that have to be established by people are: do they believe that the Tyeweretye Club is a good thing, and has it delivered benefits for the community? In other words, was the situation worse in terms of the patterns of anti-social behaviour before it started. If we say yes to that, and certainly on the evidence I've been provided with I've been persuaded of that, then somehow or other we've got to ensure that the club survives. (*Centralian Advocate* 1998a: 2)

If the club had not been required by ATSIC to operate as a self-sufficient and successful business, and if it had received ongoing government support in the form of a subsidy—in recognition of its social benefit (assuming this could be demonstrated), or in anticipation of its future, long-term beneficial effect on drinking patterns—perhaps it could have survived (Christie & Young 2011).

Only one club

Several Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal commentators believed that the Tyeweretye Club failed because it was only one, instead of being one of four, as originally planned. Betty Pearce commented, bluntly, that:

Just one club was plain stupid, better to have two or none at all! Warlpiri were always our natural enemies ... The Hermannsburg and NPY⁵¹ mob all go there, and the town camps. Not many from Areyonga went [to the club].

51 NPY = in this sense refers to people from the Ngaanyatjarra, Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara lands straddling the South Australia – Northern Territory border, southwest of Alice Springs.

Why was it so important to have more than one club? While most of Alice Springs' Aboriginal residents identified as being of Arrernte ancestry, the town also had (and increasingly has) a diverse population of Indigenous people of different affiliations. As Ottosson (2014: 131) has pointed out, the town is the service hub for thousands of remote-living Aboriginal people from many different language groups: some stay for a few days, others stay for a few years, most usually live in a number of town camps. Those proposing four clubs pointed out that the town camps were largely composed of distinct Aboriginal communities based on language and ancestral connection to country or kin. The camps north of the Gap were primarily Arrernte. On the south side, near the club, there were four town camps (Little Sisters, Anthepe, Karnte and Ilparpa) and these camps produced some of the key players in the club's fortunes. The southern town camps tended to be composed of Arrernte, Luritja, Pitjantjatjara and Warlpiri people. The original idea of having four licensed clubs, each one catering to different groups, reveals something of the local complexities of Aboriginal identity politics present in Alice Springs, in which categories of people mobilise and promote their own group, affiliation or family network to differentiate themselves, associate or distance themselves from certain others. As mentioned earlier, several older Aboriginal residents disliked changes to the layout of local hotel bars that gave them fewer strategies and less 'room' to avoid certain people while drinking.

Two significant assumptions undergirded the proposal to establish four drinking clubs. First, Aboriginal people assumed that drinking would lead to trouble, inevitably bringing 'drunken-changes-for-the-worse'.⁵² Second, Aboriginal people expected that this trouble could be forestalled by stage-managing the social environment. Room (2001) has observed that, given cultural foreknowledge of intoxication's role in violence, experienced drinkers will choose their drinking partners and venues carefully (MacAndrew & Edgerton 1969, Shore & Spicer 2004). As Basil Sansom (1980) has argued, grogging is inherently dangerous: to avoid trouble you drink with your own 'crew—with people you trust, your mates'. This mechanism is mentioned in several ethnographies of drinking (Sansom 1980, Brady 1988, 2010). Thus, it was believed that having different clubs to cater for different language or other groups would solve the problem of alcohol-related violence, which was endemic

52 Alcohol expectancy theory states that cognitions about drinking have been found to influence drinking behaviour; indeed, expectations about what will be the likely outcome of a situation have a profound effect on the actual outcome of events (see MacAndrew & Edgerton 1969, Blume et al. 2003, Shore & Spicer 2004).

in the town camps during the 1980s when the club was being planned. Rather than seeing violence in the town camps as 'normal', advocates of the four-club model rationalised such conflict as the preventable result of language groups mingling.⁵³ Alternatively, it could be argued that fighting facilitated by intoxication is usually about the airing of grievances that are as likely to occur within immediate kin groups. Fighting also arises from sexual jealousy; when people are drunk, even the smallest gesture can be interpreted in a particular way, leading, sometimes, to deadly violence among intimate partners (Lloyd 2014). Rather than addressing the need to change the culture of drinking, and the easy resort to violence, people sidestepped these issues and instead focused on lobbying in support of different clubs for different groups.

Having one club on the south side possibly reduced the customer base; some potential customers may have avoided drinking at the club because they did not want to mix with people from other language groups. Certainly, the customer base was nowhere near the 1,650 that had been predicted by the accountants from KMG. However, a number of knowledgeable participants in this project question this explanation for the club's demise, pointing out that, in fact, people from all language groups patronised the club and mixed together, including those from north of the Gap. The supposed distinctions between residents of the town camps seem to have been exaggerated: in any case, they have become less marked over time. It is notable that, when a sobering-up shelter⁵⁴ was being planned for Alice Springs in the mid-1980s, similar suggestions were made regarding the need for multiple facilities: people said that more than one shelter was needed to accommodate different groups. However, the manager of the relevant drug and alcohol organisation maintained that, with appropriate rules of behaviour, one shelter would suffice: it did.⁵⁵

Four clubs may have satisfied the needs or desires of individuals who, for various reasons, were promoting their own family networks, or avoiding others, or who wished to micro-manage their choice of drinking companions to pre-empt trouble. However, multiple clubs would have faced the same ruthless competition from commercial takeaway outlets and hotels keen to attract lucrative Aboriginal clientele. If one club was not financially viable, it is highly unlikely that four clubs could have survived without substantial ongoing external support.

53 Several anthropologists have noted this (Sansom 1980, Shore & Spicer 2004).

54 A sobering-up shelter is an overnight non-custodial refuge for intoxicated people.

55 Carol Watson, pers comm, May 2009. The Sobering-up Shelter was opened in 1986.



Fig. 22 Alcohol restrictions sign, Todd River, 2009

Source: M Brady

There are, naturally, differences of opinion about whether the Tyeweretye Club was, or became, a place of moderate drinking. Many of the now middle-aged and older Aboriginal musicians who played at the club talk nostalgically about the diversity of people who went there; they also talk about the fighting, and recall that the levels of drinking and drunkenness

could be out of control.⁵⁶ Some of those involved with the club over the 12 years of its existence believe that it was successful, or partly successful, in modifying people's drinking behaviour:

Bill had to really sort it out at first—it was a rough place, no way would a young woman go in there! People changed their behaviour dramatically. Half way through we started to see the change, we introduced food, had a half-time cook plus assistant, and a shop assistant ... The Club tried to be an induction into community life, not just selling grog. It was living in a half way between what was 'kosher' in the town and what was 'kosher' in the bush. They learned—it was their place—rules to obey made by the club themselves [sic] 'You will behave like this. If intoxicated automatically removed from premises'. Under club rules, you were removed, [whereas] the Liquor Act [only] says not to sell any more.⁵⁷

Supporters of the club believe they were victims of their own success: that the Tyeweretye Club did all the hard work of teaching the 'wild brumbies' how to behave on licensed premises and that other hotels reaped the benefit, stealing away their customers. Ferguson believed that the club 'worked *too* well—people were let into the Gap Hotel because they knew how to behave now!' In effect, the club was penalised for introducing its 'safe drinking' policies, for trying to create a family venue and for placing limits on its sales practices and the type of alcohol it sold. These were controls that other, more business-oriented premises, chose to ignore. Betty Pearce reflected that: '[The club] started to help with responsible drinking ... but [it's] not much use now: alcohol is freely available everywhere!'⁵⁸ The Tyeweretye Club failed where other licensed outlets succeeded because it had different goals from its competitors. Given a choice between maximising profits and not selling to people for short-term profitability, the club placed its corporate social responsibility first.

After years of living in the town camps and participating in Tangentyere Council's alcohol-management efforts, the manager of the defunct club believed that the only solution to Aboriginal problem drinking was to restrict takeaway sales to a few hours, starting late in the day, with no takeaway sales on Sundays. He was convinced that this would 'result in people (who wanted to drink) being forced to drink on licensed premises in a safe and controlled environment' (Ferguson 2003: 88).

56 Åse Ottosson, pers comm, 30 July 2014. One local newspaper editor described the club as a 'hapless experiment in social engineering' (Chlanda 2006).

57 Gordon Fawcett (the club's accountant from 1994 to 2005), pers comm, 7 August 2008.

58 Betty Pearce, pers comm, 8 August 2008.

Notwithstanding the research evidence of aggression and violence in and around bars and the rarity of prosecutions, Ferguson is undoubtedly right in believing that drinking on licensed premises, with at least some expectation of a basic standard of comportment, is preferable to drinking in uncontrolled public spaces (Brady 2010).

Astonishingly, only four years after the Tyeweretye Club closed, the mayor of Alice Springs called for the establishment of a 'controlled drinking venue' for Aboriginal people from the town camps and bush settlements: a club (Richards 2009: 5). It is difficult to comprehend such extraordinary ignorance of the long local history of debate, research and lobbying on the subject of community-controlled drinking clubs for Aboriginal people in Alice Springs, not to mention the existence of the closed and empty Tyeweretye Club, which still stood, intact and unused, just south of the town.

This text is taken from *Teaching 'Proper' Drinking?: Clubs and pubs in Indigenous Australia*, by Maggie Brady, published 2017 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.