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Drinking, Indigenous policy and social enterprise

In this book, I set out to examine the centuries-long project to constrain and moderate—to 'civilise'—the drinking behaviour of Indigenous Australians; in doing so, I found that the story extended in several different directions. It led me into a socio-historical study of drinking and into the history of the idea that drinking is a *learned* behaviour. That led, inevitably perhaps, to a history of aspects of Australian Indigenous policy: assimilation, self-determination, and the influence of government advisory bodies and economic development agencies on alcohol management in Indigenous communities. Finally, the research moved into the area of social enterprise, focusing on the tensions and moral dilemmas that are inherent in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous social enterprises involved in the sale of alcohol.

The first part of this book presented a *socio-historical exploration of alcohol use*. It showed how Europeans have long tried either to suppress or improve the drinking behaviour of Aboriginal people—a process that began when Bennelong was taught to raise his glass of wine in a toast to the health of the king. Such overt efforts to introduce Aboriginal people to sociable drinking were soon abandoned, and the authorities resorted to prohibitions against Aboriginal drinking, which only disappeared around 50 years ago. Civil rights, including drinking rights, were achieved by Indigenous Australians during the post-prohibition era. This was when attention shifted from banning to 'improving' drinking behaviour. In Europe, there were parallel projects of suppression and improvement

dating from the endeavours of the elite to create courtly manners and etiquette around food and drink, and to make these into accepted middle-class values. These European traditions of reform and improvement (rather than outright prohibition) in relation to alcohol gave rise to two developments that were relevant to my discussion. First, they prompted, or were accompanied by, theories of drinking as learned, and therefore malleable, behaviour. This novel idea had been hinted at in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when colonised 'natives' (including Australian Aboriginal people) were thought to be natural imitators of their colonisers, learning what was expected of people who imbibed intoxicating drinks. In the twentieth century, theories of social learning emerged from clinical studies in the United States and Britain, which posited that, rather than being biologically determined and immovable, problematic drinking behaviours were learned and could be altered. This new way of thinking about alcohol problems counteracted the prevailing disease theory and raised questions about whether abstinence was the only viable treatment solution. Diffused to Australia, by the 1970s, ideas of social learning underpinned Australian government and mission experiments in providing rationed amounts of beer to Indigenous people in many remote communities.

European traditions of improvement in drinking behaviour also produced models for the reform of the drinking environment. The poor and underprivileged were thought to misuse alcohol because of their social and working conditions, their lack of 'rational' recreation and the unscrupulous behaviour of publicans who pushed sales of liquor. The most prominent and influential of the reformist models designed to deal with these factors was the Gothenburg system of local, social regulation. Its 'disinterested', salaried management of bars and liquor stores, quarantining of profits for the use and benefit of the municipality or local community and citizen participation, combined to reduce poor serving practices and intoxicated patrons. I described how politicians, government representatives and temperance thinkers from several countries, including Britain and Australia, became fascinated by this Scandinavian plan, and how its basic principles were taken up and put into practice by anti-prohibitionists and reformers of licensed public houses. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Gothenburg-style ideas took hold in regional areas of South Australia, where residents bought shares in their local hotels, participated as board members in their management and decided on the distribution of profits. My account of

this development, and how these community-owned hotels have fared over time, set the scene for the case studies presented later in the book as studies in Indigenous social enterprise.

Australian Indigenous policy formed the second major theme of this book, in particular, how Indigenous policy both affected and guided the approaches taken to alcohol availability and regulation. Unlike the United States, 'prohibition' for the general population in this country applied only to small and atypical districts, such as the 'temperance colony' along the Murray River, and a scattering of neighbourhoods that voted in local option polls to be 'dry'. However, for the Indigenous population (including Torres Strait and Pacific Islanders), prohibition applied to people according to their degree of 'assimilation'; it was lifted as part of a wider program of civil rights in which Indigenous people were supposed to be incorporated into Australian society as citizens, with all the accompanying rights and responsibilities of 'normal' (white) citizens.

The struggle for, and achievement of, the right to drink was really an assimilationist project: it was believed that 'they' should be able to drink like 'us'. However, as the old restrictions were repealed, jurisdiction by jurisdiction, and people began to act on their new freedoms, the question of how to *manage* these new rights arose. Once assimilation evolved into self-determination, merely having the same right to drink was not enough. Aboriginal people were expected—indeed, were obliged—to produce new forms of authority that could deal with the enactment of these rights. Previous traditional authority structures were repeatedly found to be inadequate; hence, the abandonment of some early experiments in alcohol rationing. As part of the transition from assimilation to self-determination, Aboriginal people were challenged to invent *new* modes of self-regulation through their local control and oversight of liquor sales from community-based clubs or via community purchases of public hotels. As illustrated in the case studies presented in this book, they did this by creating complex lists of rules that attempted to regulate the personal comportment of Aboriginal patrons and enforce their social and civic responsibilities; the lists also kept track of which patrons were excluded from the premises.

Aboriginal purchases of licensed hotels were facilitated by policy developments, such as the creation of development agencies and the promotion of Aboriginal entrepreneurship. As the case studies illustrated, the difficulties that followed were due, in large part, to the failure of these agencies—the ADC and its descendants, ATSIC and IBA—to foresee

problems in underwriting projects that involved alcohol sales, and to create policies that would pre-empt these problems. A shift in policy, from an emphasis on social goals to primarily economic ones, further complicated matters, placing several Aboriginal enterprises at risk by impelling them to concentrate on alcohol sales, rather than the wellbeing of the community.

In the process of recounting the story of these Aboriginal enterprises, I showed the extent to which they had unwittingly resembled and replicated the strengths and weaknesses of the Gothenburg model of local control of liquor sales. I argued that Australian governments, and the agencies designed to promote Indigenous self-determination and economic independence—being ignorant of both the principles of the original Gothenburg model and its practical testing (through the experiences of community hotels in South Australia)—were apparently unable to devise an enterprise policy that was suited to *social* enterprise. This, in a sense, was what the Gothenburg system aimed to do; it sought create a viable liquor business that was socially responsible, avoided profiteering from alcohol sales and supported moderate consumption.

The licensed Indigenous entities discussed here, both the social clubs and hotels, needed a different policy framework—one that would have benefited by the experiences of Gothenburg-style premises. They also needed earlier intervention from external agencies to provide troubleshooting around governance matters, and to deflect problems of responsible service. In addition, they needed ongoing guidance and monitoring.

The third field of scholarship I explored in this book was *social enterprise*. I presented material from Europe and South Australia on the conscious diffusion of the Gothenburg system, and juxtaposed this with research from Aboriginal communities that revealed the *inadvertent*, unconscious mobilisation of this system. Remarkably, Indigenous and non-Indigenous community hotels existed in parallel, with each apparently unaware of the other. Indigenous hotels (and clubs) shared some goals in common with Gothenburg-style hotels: the expectation that ownership would enable greater local control over liquor sales, prevent sly grog sales, offer employment opportunities for Indigenous people and raise revenue for community causes. All the municipalities and communities involved experienced successes and failures, leading to the conclusion that while social enterprise of this kind is worth attempting, it requires considerable effort.

The business of establishing community-owned licensed premises is fraught with contradictions, hazards (moral and otherwise) and challenges. There is an inescapable tension within the definition of 'community benefit' that exists between the goal of moderating alcohol consumption and generating a surplus (which might be used to fund community projects) by selling it.

This tension is particularly severe in an Indigenous context, as Indigenous people experience a disproportionate physical and social cost from alcohol abuse. An Indigenous hotel or club that 'poisons its own people' is clearly an undesirable form of enterprise. The tension increases when an articulate temperance lobby (often led by women) draws attention to the inherent moral hazard of a social enterprise (often run by men) that sells alcohol. In this book, I documented the efforts of white Australian WCTU members and Aboriginal women in central and northern Australia who engaged in formal and informal acts of resistance against new and existing licences run by their menfolk; both groups, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, used similar arguments and rhetoric, pointing out the ethical dilemmas inherent in the use of 'grog money' for good works.

The research reported here revealed how the community governance of social enterprises is not purely a matter of good administration or compliance with the relevant liquor legislation. The administration of such enterprises is imbued with the additional challenges posed by political contestation, both within and beyond the communities involved. As Room (1982: 447) observed, all systems of local control, whether they are state licensing systems or systems of local option and decision-making around alcohol, share commonalities in that they:

> Create at least a partial monopoly for those inside them, whether they be state or private interests. They are thus usually very profitable for all concerned, and they create large and powerful vested interests in the continuance of the basic system, with gradual liberalisations of control for the benefit of those already inside.

This observation is borne out by what took place in numerous beer canteens and clubs in remote Aboriginal communities. If a club was already in place, and the majority of the community were drinkers, then, irrespective of the problems caused by the outlet, the popular vote would ensure that the desires of the drinkers (to oppose restrictions, to extend hours or to lobby for higher-alcohol content drinks) would be carried (Moran 2013: 199). The system comes with a built-in 'ratchet

mechanism'—the community council (or Indigenous corporation or state) derives fiscal (and other) benefits from its franchise to sell alcohol; therefore, it is politically painful to extinguish that interest (Room 1982: 447).

It often takes a religious or popular uprising around alcohol before licences and revenues will be taken away (Room 1982). Examples of such uprisings were presented in this book: resistance to the Tyeweretye Club by Pitjantjatjara women; the wrecking of the Murrinh Patha Social Club at Wadeye; and the alarm raised by concerned women and men of the Kimberley over takeaway sales in Fitzroy Crossing. In each case, the systems of government needed a 'jolt' to force an appropriate level of response. It is to their credit that these Aboriginal protestors mobilised sufficient support to mount challenges that highlighted the moral contradictions inherent in these enterprises.