

Submission
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**INQUIRY INTO THE MUSIC AND ARTS ECONOMY IN
NEW SOUTH WALES**

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Member of the public

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Summary

To whom it may concern. This submission will be from the perspective of a normal member of the public who has grown up witnessing first hand the problems our night-time economy faces and can directly contrast this with lived experiences having grown up in the Netherlands and spending significant time in Berlin, two places that do a much better job of ensuring people have a safe, fun night out and have created drinking cultures that are far superior to the ones we have in Australia.

I believe my opinion is important because I have often been on the front lines witnessing the *cause* of the problems our society faces. Contrast this with the opinions of doctors, nurses, paramedics, police and parents who more often see the *symptoms*. It seems to only ever be their opinion that holds any weight with parliament, which is unfortunate because we all want the same thing: Less violence, less alcohol related injuries/deaths and fun, positive nights outs for everyone. We just differ on what we think is the right way to go about it.

Key Issues

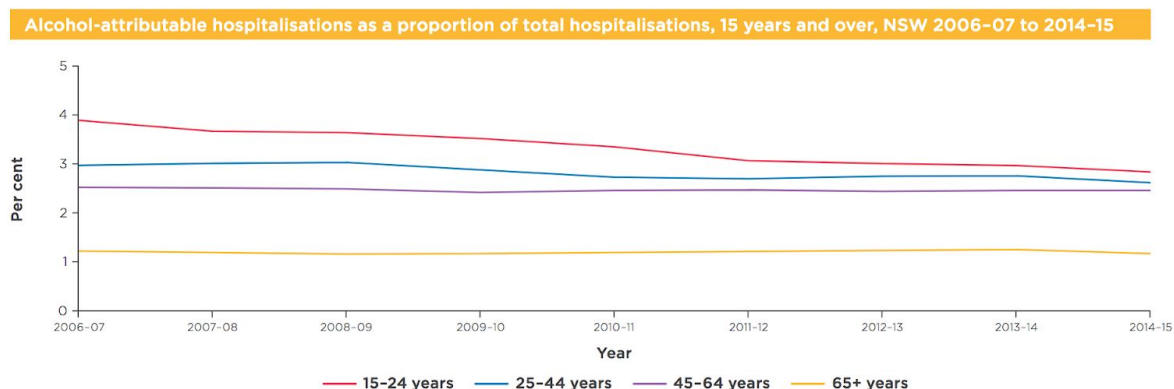
Australia's drinking problem

It is often said that Australia has a drinking problem and while I think that to an extent that is probably true I also believe that it is very much exaggerated by the media. We must separate injuries/deaths caused by high levels of intoxication on a Friday/Saturday night and those caused by long term, extensive drinking in the home such as cancer, liver disease and heart disease. They are two distinct issues, with different causes and different solutions. I will only be focusing on the former here.

A 2016 study by NSW's Chief Health Officer found "Alcohol-attributable hospitalisation rates have remained stable over the last 9 years" (Chant, 2016, p.13). This is in sharp contrast to the headlines in the Sydney Morning Herald and the Daily Telegraph that exclaimed on a daily basis that alcohol related violence was out of control. That same study found that alcohol-related emergency department visits for 15-24 year olds have decreased since 2007 (Chant, 2016, p.13). All this was before the O'Farrell and Baird government intervened with the lockout laws and other measures designed to curb violence.

"The proportion of alcohol-attributable hospitalisations has decreased in people aged 15–24 years, from 3.9% in 2006–07 to 2.9% in 2014–15" (Chant, 2016, p. 13). However, that figure is

for the entirety of NSW and the study acknowledges that the rate is higher in regional NSW and Aboriginal communities (Chant, 2016, p.13) so the true figure in Sydney cannot reliably be deduced and is likely skewed by those figures.



(Chant, 2016, p. 14)

The report says that NSW has the lowest proportion of persons drinking at levels that increase immediate risk of harm (which means binge drinkers) and yet we have the most restrictive alcohol laws in the country.

Let's compare Australia globally. A WHO report (WHO, 2011, p. 4) puts Australia's "Total adult (15+) per capita consumption, in litres of pure alcohol, 2005" at 10.00-12.49 liters per capita, equal with Spain, Italy, Belgium, The Netherlands and behind the UK, France, Germany, Denmark and Portugal (Greater than or equal to 12.50 liters per capita). Notably then, we drink less than France and Portugal and the same as Spain and Italy, four countries that are often held up as examples to follow.

If you break it down by type of alcohol consumed Australia's favourite is beer, something it shares with Spain, Germany, the UK, Belgium and The Netherlands, while wine is the drink of choice in Italy, Portugal and France (WHO, 2011, p. 7). It is often stated that we should drink more wine and that is part of "the problem" but I'm not sure anyone would class Spain, Germany, Belgium and The Netherlands as countries with drinking problems and I've personally witnessed plenty of Australians binge drinking on wine.

So do we have a drinking problem? I think it's probably a massive over-simplification and was largely driven by the Sydney Morning Herald and the Daily Telegraph sensationalizing the tragic deaths of two young men. More accurately I would say that Australia is a country made up of many diverse people and communities and some of those people and communities have drinking problems, and blanket bans for everyone probably does reduce violence but it also punishes the majority for the actions of the few and reduces people's enjoyment of this city.

Australian drinking culture, NSW's legal framework and the relation between the two.

I was born in Sydney and have lived here for most of my life, apart from a period where my family moved to The Netherlands for my Dad's work (age 12-16). I also have a German girlfriend from Berlin and have spent a lot of time visiting the city over the years. I think this puts me in a valuable position to compare and contrast the different drinking cultures between the countries and the legal frameworks which I believe drive those cultures.

In Holland as in Germany, the legal age of drinking for beer and wine is 16. Alcohol can be easily purchased (extremely cheaply, cheaper than water at times) almost anywhere and at anytime. In Berlin, they have special 24 hour shops called "Späties" which serve this exact purpose and you can comfortably walk down the street with a glass of beer in your hand. You'd think then, at least if you were an Australian public health official, that alcohol related violence would be out of control with kids running around the streets glassing each other, and while yes, violence and injury still happen it's nothing like what they imagine.

So why then does Australia, with it's 18 year drinking age, 10pm bottle shop closing times, lockouts and 3am last drinks, alcohol-free streets and heavily taxed alcohol have similar per capita consumption to these two countries and apparently worse binge drinking problems?

I read an article on The Conversation (Daube, 2013), which inadvertently made a point that it was not trying to make. That article's premise was that Alcohol companies used "Forbidden Fruit advertising" to get kids interested in alcohol. The author gives an example of a tobacco company called Imperial Tobacco whose marketing research report said:

"Of course, one of the very things that are attractive is [the] mere fact that cigarettes are forbidden fruit...when the adolescent is looking for something that at the same time makes them feel different and also makes them feel that they are old enough to ignore this weight of authority so as to feel that they have made their own choice, what better could be found than a cigarette? It is not just a smoke. It is a statement, a naughty adventure, a milestone episode"

I think that really is the crux of the problem. Public health officials in Australia have continuously advocated laws for further increasing restrictions but all this does is make kids and young adults want it more. When you are 13/14 you are not really interested in alcohol but by the time you're 15,16 and 17 a lot of kids are already drinking and going out. The difference is, that in Holland and Germany they are drinking in licensed venues while Australian kids' first years of drinking involve getting wasted at house parties and in parks by drinking goon sacs and entire bottles of passion pop.

Drinking is not put on a pedestal there like it is here. You aren't cool because you drink alcohol, it is completely normal. Here if you've got a fake ID or your older brother bought you a case of VB, or you can skoll 100 shots of beer in 100 minutes you're given elevated status. This is exactly what we don't want. We want peoples first time drinking to be socializing in pubs/restaurants and at street festivals where social norms and older people mean the kind of behaviour described above is not accepted. Instead they are getting themselves slaughtered at home until they are 18, by which time they've already embedded terrible drinking attitudes in their brains.

The alcohol taxation laws work on a similar premise. If we make alcohol more expensive, people will drink less. It's a premise that makes sense and I would imagine that the data backs it up but my own experience has been that all it does is increase binge drinking in younger groups. The reason for that is that teenagers, who often don't have a lot of money to spend on a night out buy the cheapest alcohol they can find that will give them the biggest bang for their buck. Often that has a higher percentage of alcohol than normal beer/wine.

When I was going out as an 18/19 year old in Kings Cross, that was Goon (otherwise known as cask wine) and Passion Pop, some disgusting sort of flavoured, carbonated wine. They do this, because their limited budget means they can't afford to spend \$7.50 on a schooner of beer so they binge drink before they go out. It's a sad state affairs. Going out in Holland and Germany, there was never a need to do this because beer/wine is so cheap. It is perfectly acceptable to casually stroll down to the pub in Germany with your 1 euro beer in your hand and not be looked at as a criminal.

Aggressive bouncers/RSA Marshals increasing confrontation.

Of all the things that irk me about Australia's drinking culture it is the antagonistic, over-aggressive RSA Marshals and Bouncers that are the most annoying of all. This is an opinion that is shared by many people from overseas that I have spoken to and many well-travelled Australians too.

Compare and contrast these two statements:

"We work towards a lean government that minimises interference in our daily lives and maximises individual and private-sector initiative;" (NSW Liberals, 2018).

"(c) monitoring alcohol consumption by patrons and their behaviour for signs of irresponsible, rapid or excessive consumption of alcohol and for signs of intoxication" (AHA, 2018)

The first quote is from the NSW liberal party's website and the latter is a description of an RSA Marshal from the Liquor Regulation 2008 act, although it wouldn't be out of place in a "How to guide" for governments that are in the process of implementing a police state. The two quotes

are irreconcilable and it is a real shame that a party that claims to stand for individual freedom and choice has been the main driver in implementing the most restrictive of laws.

Often times, these RSA Marshals are intimidating (they are designed to be), un-intelligent, poorly trained and significantly lacking in social skills and professionalism. The responsible service of alcohol means that you serve alcohol responsibly, obviously, but in most Sydney venues that is taken to mean “we’ll serve you irresponsibly until we’ve extracted as much money from you as possible and allowed you to get drunk, at which point we’ll kick you out and wipe our hands of any responsibility for you”. Even the name of the position is awful. Marshal implies some police or military presence which has no place in the hospitality industry and they are almost always anything but inhospitable.

I can recall only one positive interaction with an RSA Marshal. Almost all of them have been aggressive and rude. The Marshal came up to me, tapped me on the shoulder and offered me a glass of water, discretely explaining that I was looking a bit drunk. Because of the polite, friendly manner in which he approached me I had no issue with what he was saying and drank several glasses of water. I then went on to continue to have a great night. Most of the time, unfortunately, some huge, intimidating person approaches someone without any nuance whatsoever and aggressively pushes them out of the building, publicly humiliating them in the process.

Night club bouncers are pretty much the same except they also practice open discrimination whereby men need to have a ratio of at least 2:1 girls with them or have to pay double the cover charge. That kind of open discrimination wouldn’t be tolerated anywhere else but it is pretty widely accepted at nightclubs. There’s also the fact that many of them are absolute thugs, as evidenced by the bashing and gagging of a patron in the Ivy nightclub basement (Hall, 2015).

If there was one thing that I wish this review would change it is the antagonistic, tension creating attitudes of Bouncers/Marshals who have the power to ruin people’s nights and regularly do, and stand over you like a hawk monitoring your every move while you try and socialise with your friends.

Blanket closing times and poor late night public transport as a contributing factor to anti-social behaviour.

Lastly, another big factor in our night-time economy is the lack of public transport and cost of getting home. In its heyday Kings Cross clubs would all close at pretty much the same time. Unfortunately, this was also when the trains had stopped running and coincided (coincidentally?) with the taxi change over time, which meant taxis were not picking anyone up. So often times, people would be forced to walk home, leading to all sorts of problems like public urination, street fights, vomiting in people’s gardens etc.

In Berlin, trains run late on weekends which means it's easy to get home and people leave entertainment venues quickly, rather than lingering in the streets surrounding the entertainment areas. In Holland, everyone can get home easily because a lot of people cycle and where I lived in the Hague they had outdoor toilets, which meant people didn't pee on people's front fences.

Uber has made the taxi situation a little better, however regular taxis still deny fares to passengers who aren't going in the direction the taxi driver wants to go, which as I understand it, is illegal. Uber and Taxis are also expensive and teenagers with no money are the ones most likely to end up walking home, causing trouble on the way.

The blanket closing times are also really bad policy. If an entire nightclub (and in the case of Kings Cross an entire entertainment precinct) are emptied on to the street at once you are just asking for trouble. In Berlin, you could theoretically party for days because some clubs don't actually close, or if they do, they stay open until 7-8am in the morning. What this means is that people leave in smaller groups, which is safer for everyone and less disturbing for surrounding neighbourhoods.

Recommendations

Consider lowering the drinking age and reduce the tax on beer/wine

Sure, it sounds crazy and will probably never happen in Australia but it works all over Europe. We need to stop making alcohol this rebellious forbidden fruit and normalize its consumption in a responsible way. Those early years are when behaviours are cemented and cultures are formed. We don't want kids growing up thinking drinking sacs of goon is normal. We want them having a glass of wine/beer with friends in a restaurant or pub. However, the current legal drinking age and cost of certain alcohols achieves exactly the opposite.

Make street festivals/drinking in the street acceptable

There is something nice and relaxing about drinking beer in the street. We have the perfect weather for it in Sydney but in most cases it is banned or extremely regulated. Street festivals combined with food (E.g. The Night Noodle markets) are great ways to bring people and communities together.

People love having a glass of wine or a beer in the street and it works all over the world but in

Australia if you step outside the pub you'll get some aggressive bouncer telling you off immediately.

For this to work you would need something similar to what they have in Germany called *Pfand*. Basically, you pay a few euros extra for your drink, however, you can get that money back by returning your glass to the bar. This would stop the problem of people leaving their glasses all over the place.

Re-think the entire RSA training and employment strategy.

I've already touched on it but the responsible service of alcohol measures we have in this country seem to make things worse in a lot of cases. The bouncers/RSA Marshals are so often rude, aggressive and poorly trained.

They increase tension with patrons and often times make completely harmless situations 10x worse by escalating the conflict. The entire time you are socialising with your friends you can't help but shake the feeling that you are being watched. It puts you on edge, creating an us versus them scenario and increasing tension. We want to achieve exactly the opposite scenario. People should be made to feel welcome, safe and relaxed.

If a bartender notices someone who appears to be heavily intoxicated, instead of publicly humiliating them and asking them to leave, de-escalate the situation by discretely offering them a glass of water and asking them to come back in 15 minutes and maybe have some food. While it is ultimately the individual's choice to get drunk venues have to take a bit of the responsibility too. They can't just wipe their hands of the responsibility and pass the drunk person off into the street.

If you treat drunk people aggressively you will get an aggressive response. If you take steps to de-escalate the situation they will most likely not be aggressive.

Make being friendly the key hiring requirement for bouncers/RSA Marshals. And change the name from Marshal to host or get rid of the role entirely.

Improve late night public transport

Get trains and buses running later at night. The quicker you get people out of the central entertainment venues and home into their beds the less time there is for them to linger on the streets where trouble is likely to occur. I believe this is a massive part of the problem.

Place more outdoor urinals throughout the city

When someone's got to go, they've got to go. Better that they go in a urinal than in someone's front lawn.

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