

Cops, not liquor regulations, reduce street violence

The emphasis on lockouts and alcohol laws is a distraction from tackling late night violence, argues **Tim Wilson**

On one of its websites, the Queensland Government is remarkably honest about its attitude towards law-abiding businesses—‘the ability to trade is a privilege, not a right.’

According to politicians and the press, late at night, Australian cities are transformed into ‘warzones’, where alcohol is fuelling violence and thuggery around urban pubs, bars and clubs.

The response of state governments across the country has been to impose ‘lockouts’ upon licensed venues—bans on entering venues after a certain hour. The venues may remain open, and those inside can still purchase alcohol, but no new patrons can enter.

But lockouts don’t work. They needlessly hamper late night businesses and the freedom to trade without having any significant impact on late night violence.

Queensland has had a state-wide lockout in place since July 2006. Adelaide already has voluntary lockouts. Perth is considering them. The Victorian regional centres of Ballarat, Bendigo and Warrnambool also have them. And this year the Victorian Government trialled a 2am lockout from June until September.

Queensland has the dubious title as the lockout leader. The state-wide introduction followed localised lockouts in Mooloolaba and Mackay in the late 1990s, Cairns in December 2002, the Gold Coast and Townsville since mid-2004 and Rockhampton since mid-2005.

But the results have been weak. Before committing to the state-wide lockout the Queensland Government introduced a twelve month trial in July 2005. By October Queensland Police had already reported that there was ‘no significant change in the number of reported crimes.’

The WA Government is considering the introduction of a lockout in Northbridge and the Perth CBD. Rather than imposing a blanket lockout for pubs, bars and nightclubs the current proposal is to introduce a lockout for venues two hours prior to closing.

The South Australian Government is now awaiting the results of Melbourne’s 2am lockout to decide what path it takes. Voluntary lockouts are already operational in Glenelg, Whyalla and Hahndorf.

Fortunately it looks like the South Australian Government is interested in evidence that they work. SA Consumer Affairs Minister, Jennifer Rankine, said earlier this year ‘it’s really important to have proper evidence that shows that a lockout has a significant impact.’

But not everyone in South Australia is exercising the same judgement. In an article in the *Adelaide Advertiser* Chief Inspector Scott Duval said ‘lockouts can contribute to a reduction in anti-

social behaviour and alcohol-related assaults ... lockouts across Australia have created crime reduction.’

But Duval was quoting the initial anecdotal evidence collected by Victorian Police after the first weekend of Melbourne’s three-month trial lockout. The Victorian Police haven’t released any further evidence to show the ‘success’ of the lockout, and early reports have not indicated any significant impact.

The first job of any government is to secure its citizens’ personal security. But security is not justification for overzealous crackdowns on civil liberties, particularly when there it is not clear that doing so will actually ensure security.

Certainly, there are legitimate concerns behind each government’s enthusiasm to introduce a lockout. And there is some evidence that violent assaults are increasing in urban areas. In Melbourne, Victorian Police data shows that the number of assaults has, indeed, increased over the last five years, although the data also points out that assailants are also more likely to be identified and caught after the incident occurs.

Unfortunately, state governments’ focus on the regulatory framework governing alcohol sales obscures what should be the first policy response to a law and order problem—increased resources directed towards policing. Alcohol is at most a contributing factor to violent acts. Many high-profile incidents of urban violence have involved no alcohol at all, or the police and prosecutors have pointed out that alcohol consumption had only a minor involvement.

There are already laws against violence; Australia’s urban centres don’t need more laws, they need more enforcement.

The threat of arrest, prosecution and imprisonment is supposed to discourage illegal behaviour. An increased police presence should be able to tackle assaults directly. And more cops on the beat would have no negative impact on law-abiding late-night drinkers. Nevertheless, in many cities the police are under-manned and under-resourced—the Victorian Police Association claims that it is as much as 3000 officers short.

The problem of street violence is going to be solved by more and better equipped police, not amendments to liquor regulations.

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