

Alcohol is a National Issue

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THIS ARTICLE IS TAKEN FROM THE PRESENTATION DELIVERED BY DAVID TEMPLEMAN, CEO OF ADCA AT THE NTCOSS CONFERENCE 28 MAY 2013 FORUM 'STRENGTHENING THE THREE PILLARS OF THE NATIONAL DRUG STRATEGY'. THE FORUM WAS HOSTED BY THE ASSOCIATION OF ALCOHOL AND OTHER DRUG AGENCIES NT (AADANT)

It's never wise coming to somewhere like the Territory, and suggesting how things should be done.

I acknowledge that things are different ... done differently and by people who have figured out the best way to go about it in a really different environment. That's why it really rankles when people with little experience in your patch step in and use their clout to impose their will.

People love to accuse Canberra of throwing its weight around ... Canberra did this ... Canberra said that.

The truth is that the people of Canberra have to put up with the same "big brother knows best" attitude of our federal politicians because, like you as another Territory, we're lesser beings in the Australian Federation.

The difference is that much of our bread and butter is derived from the business that is the Australian Government.

To that end, I'm not going to tell any Territorians how to do anything.

But, I'm going to make observations based on the role and the experience of the Alcohol

and other Drugs Council as the national peak body for the sector. We've been around in some shape or form for more than 40 years and we've seen the wheel reinvented in this business many times over.

I will say at the outset that, as an organisation, we're bemused, mystified and occasionally outraged by the stance of the Territory Government on alcohol issues. Its activities over the last week have given us a field day.

Granted, *you've got some bloody good drinkers here* – so the song goes. I've always found it incongruous that someone like Ted Egan, who has never had anything but the best interests of the place at heart, could write those words. A tongue-in-cheek sentiment certainly but one that's now assumed a dreadful truth, with local alcohol consumption amongst the highest per capita in the world.

But you're not alone. ADCA wrote to the Prime Minister and Opposition Leader earlier this year, pointing out that the "rivers of grog" she referred to in her *bridging the gap* address to parliament was not an issue solely in the Northern Territory or other parts of rural, remote or Indigenous Australia.

Rather, it was a problem that manifested itself nationwide.

If there's one thing I question, it's the apparent inability of the Territory's leadership to take advice; or to listen to people with decades of valuable experience. Thus far, the only response we've seen has been the tired old warning to would-be critics to butt out of Northern Territory affairs.

Why hasn't the NT Government listened to the Judges

In 2010, the Territory's then Chief Justice took early retirement, fed up with the cycle of violence and the failure of the prison system to rehabilitate offenders.

Brian Martin, a 40 year veteran of the law, said it was demoralising and distressing to see so many cases (of alcohol-fuelled violence) and so many repeat offenders. He said these needed to be addressed at a level before they got to the criminal court because there was a limit to what (the courts) could do.

Putting people in jail had proven to be an ineffective way of rehabilitating people, he said.

Within the life of this government, Justice Martin's successor, Trevor Riley observed that it was unfortunate and terribly sad that genuine efforts to curb the flow of alcohol, which could address the problems of those who suffer from abuse of alcohol, were not pursued

That was a follow-up to Justice Riley's earlier call for more to be done to "restrict the flow of alcohol to those who abuse it".

Like Brian Martin, Trevor Riley has decades of experience in the law – nearly 40 years of it in the Territory. You can't accuse him of being a blow-in.

Nor can the experience or the opinions of the people who work in peak AOD and Health organisations in the Territory be dismissed.

Our associates in AADANT, members of the Territory's Aboriginal peak organisations and the Aboriginal Medical Services Association display a level of cohesion of which they are justifiably proud.

These organisations took their role seriously in pulling together last year's Darwin Grog Summit, which I attended. The vibe was very positive and the communique that followed the event equally so, urging ongoing contact with the federal and territory governments.

I would hope that the Northern Territory government soon gets its house sufficiently in order to realise those aims.

Like the learned judges before them, members of these organisations understand that ease of access to alcohol lies at the heart of many of the Territory's problems. I believe your opinions need to count for a lot more and that the government should acknowledge them; rather than adopting an adversarial stance in dealings with you.

I understand that AADANT has yet to see any indication of a



Darwin Grog Summit,

service agreement for the next financial year. That's despite member organisations that will almost certainly be expected to put their hand up to deliver community services on behalf of the government. How can they plan ahead, waiting to see whether or not they will be funded, while the government has them on a knife edge?

Governments Australia-wide need to understand that advocacy is much more than a convivial cuppa at morning tea. Instead of getting their noses out of joint because someone puts their point in a forceful manner, departmental officers, ministers and their advisors should realise that the ultimate aim is a better deal for the local community, regardless of which side of the fence one sits.

ADCA is concerned the government apparently refuses to acknowledge the role and the experience of advocates; the advice they might give. It insists that the solution to the Territory's alcohol problems lies in a front-on approach to public drunkenness.

The government intends to go down the road of mandatory rehabilitation, against all recommendations from health practitioners, from the drug and alcohol sector, from mental health experts, from the legal profession.

Whose advice are they taking? Judging by what we've seen passed off as policy in recent days; I can only assume the alcohol problem is wider than we thought.

ADCA has said all along that Territory rehab centres will be prisons by another name.

How else will people in rehab be restrained? Are organisations in our sector expected to assume a corrections role ... are they to be jailers in what will be secure facilities?

Elsewhere on the alcohol front, and in a giant leap 30 years into the past, the government's announcement of Alcohol Protection Orders will see drunkenness re-criminalised, with police able to charge people for breaching orders when they may not have been convicted of any other offence.

Fines, incarceration ... where's the rehab in that? This won't be the health approach to drinking problems. Territorians were promised during the election campaign. We can only assume that at least some severely alcohol-dependant people end up in gaol and not in treatment. The question then will be where these people will get the health support they need.

AIC deaths in custody figures

Our concern is compounded by the release only three days ago of an Australian Institute of Criminology report that reveals the Northern Territory has Australia's highest rates of Indigenous deaths in custody.

The report documents overall deaths in custody across Australia to June 30, 2011. While that's outside the ambit of the current CLP government, ADCA feels the causes of death, an increasing number of people dying from heart attack and cirrhosis of the liver, more than justify calls for better health care ... in prison ... in rehabilitation.

Between 1979 and 2011, there were 32 deaths in custody in the Territory, 24 of them Indigenous people.

The Territory also has the highest incarceration rate of Indigenous people in Australia, with 97 per cent of juvenile detainees being Aboriginal. Four fifths of adults in prison or other forms of detention are Indigenous.

These people are among those that the COAG Reform Council has identified as victims of widening health gaps, underlining the need for governments to follow international recommendations on how to appropriately address the social determinants of health.

The Social Determinants of Health Alliance, of which ADCA

NT Indigenous deaths in custody

- *Aust Institute of Criminology - NT Indigenous deaths in custody Australia's worst*
- *more dying from heart attack and cirrhosis of the liver*
- *24 Indigenous deaths in custody 1979 – 2011*
- *Australia's highest incarceration rate of Indigenous people; 97% of juvenile detainees Aboriginal*
- *82% of adults in prison or other detention Indigenous*

is a member, responded to last week's COAG report, *Healthcare 2011–12: Comparing performance across Australia*, with a call for Parliament to adopt the World Health Organisation's *Closing the Gap in a Generation* report and for social determinants to be considered across all policy areas.

Only last week, the Federal Attorney-General, Mark Dreyfus, told a Perth audience that access to justice for all Australians had to be a non-negotiable feature of our democracy. It is, he said, especially important for families and children in crisis, the sick, the elderly, new arrivals, Indigenous communities and those accused of serious crime.

I believe that we, as advocates for so many of those groups, must hold all governments to account. In Queensland, where alcohol management plans are under threat in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities ... where health, alcohol and drug programs are under a perpetual cloud ... in New South Wales, where the government is joined at the hip with the liquor and hospitality industry.

Locally, the Northern Territory Government is denying justice to

many of its people by insisting that it will solve public drunkenness before it takes on the question of the ease of access to alcohol. That suggests to me, when the desirable course of action is so blatantly obvious, that the government is securely in the pocket of the liquor and hospitality industry.

Why else would a government minister find it necessary to stand up at last week's Australian Hotels Association gathering to reassure its members that they, the members, really cared about problem drinkers? Apparently the AHA awards night was so important that Chief Minister Giles and his deputy Dave Tollner both had to attend.

I'm sure the long grassers, the homeless, the mentally ill, and the unemployed would have been thrilled to hear the Chief Minister tell those present that the tradition of "having a coldie" needed to be enshrined as part of Territory life.

Chief Justice Riley observed several years ago that Aboriginal offenders do not enjoy the same rights as offenders from other sections of the community. Certainly, they don't enjoy having a coldie in the pub on a regular basis. Nor will they be afforded

the same sort of treatment that virtually ignores the behaviour of non-Indigenous carousers in Darwin and the Alice.

Disadvantaged people will make up the lion's share of those committed under mandatory rehab legislation.

ADCA has asked on several occasions who advises the Territory on alcohol.

Consider this. Reports reached us last month of a woman bashed to death after a drinking session at Kalkarindji. Northern Territory Health's regional director was reported after the event saying that tougher restrictions on takeaway alcohol sales were long overdue ... that staff from Northern Territory Health had gone to the Liquor Commission, as had elders from the nearby Lajamanu community, seeking a common-sense approach to alcohol restrictions. To what avail?

He mentioned an individual who bought \$1,300 worth of alcohol in the one purchase. That's along the same lines of New South Wales police commander Mark Murdoch's observation that easy access to alcohol lay at the heart of the problem. Commander Murdoch said it was ridiculous that someone could hitch their box trailer to the Commodore, fill it up with grog from the local takeaway and no-one would bat an eyelid.

But you don't need to go to New South Wales to hear those stories. Northern Territory Police Commander Michael White went on the record last week expressing his concern over high alcohol-related levels of domestic violence and suicide in remote communities. Commander White says alcohol sales need to be restricted. Will the government he works for listen?

Alcohol in the Territory

I know that businesses exist to make money, but when the aftermath of the product they're peddling, in this case alcohol, costs

the Territory \$642 million a year, or \$4197 for every adult Territorian, it's time for action.

Those are the Northern Territory's own figures taken from a series of frequently asked questions in relation to mandatory rehab. Doesn't that say something? Is that sort of cost to society acceptable here?

If the government won't listen to its own people in the field; to judges, to people from the health department, to the people in community organisations, to you, then who will it listen to?

Two weeks ago, ADCA representatives appeared before a Senate committee inquiring into justice reinvestment. We told the committee that the Territory budget had included a commitment to more than \$100 million over the next three years for mandatory rehab for alcohol problems. No word of diversionary programs or community-based care; the heart of justice reinvestment.

Territory Senator Trish Crossin asked whether we or any of our associates had been approached to discuss these issues with the NT Government. The answer was, sadly, no.

I would have thought that the Territory might jump at the opportunity to make savings in

the corrections and justice sector by adopting the concept. It could prevent at least some perpetrators of alcohol-related offences from entering the corrections system. It might stop them becoming part of the recidivist population typical of Australian prisons, reducing the load on law enforcement, courts and prisons.

And it might lead to a more enlightened approach.

The Territory could consider the social determinants; people's circumstances that lead to offending behaviour, identifying where such behaviour occurs, why, and designing programs that might counter it.

Places like the Territory are enamoured of the multiplier effect, trotting it out to justify spending on tourism initiatives. The same multiplier effect applies for every dollar invested in health and prevention, where communities can achieve savings in areas like substance abuse treatment and criminal justice system costs. That's not to mention the wider impact on the trajectory of young lives and their families and broader society.

Why should the Territory's approach to health and the well-being of a large part of its community be any different? ●

Alcohol in the Territory

- *highest per capita consumption in Australia, 1.5 times the national average*
- *hospitals and health, policing, courts and corrections cost \$642 million a year, almost 4.5 times the national average*
- *60% of assaults and 67% of domestic violence incidents involve alcohol*
- *alcohol-related deaths triple the national average*