

Alcohol, community action and the role of police: lessons from Northern Territory initiatives

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Introduction

In 1975 a young, recently recruited police officer, who had grown up in the southern state of Victoria, arrived to take up duties in the central Australian town of Alice Springs. Twenty-four years later he recalled the experience:

I think Alice Springs was a culture shock as far as the Aboriginals were concerned. The type of dealings we had with the Aboriginals, as you probably appreciate, the alcohol issues and concerns there, it was a very depressing relationship with Aboriginal people.

You know, we would probably lock up on any one shift, twenty to fifty people, and they'd go into the cells. You'd deal with those sorts of issues, and you saw a very poor side of Aboriginal people (Northern Territory Archives Service 1999).

Since 1975, successive governments have wrestled with the problems generated by Indigenous marginalization and disadvantage in Australia, and with the corrosive part played by alcohol and other drug misuse in sustaining these conditions. To name a few landmarks, in 1989 the national government adopted a comprehensive national Aboriginal health strategy (National Aboriginal Health Strategy Working Party 1989); two years later a Royal Commission appointed to investigate high levels of Aboriginal deaths in custody drew attention to the links between public drunkenness, incarceration and deaths in custody, and advanced a series of recommendations to which national, state and territory governments all committed themselves (Johnston 1991). In 2007, in response to a report alleging shocking rates of child sexual abuse, violence and other evidence of alcohol-fuelled problems in Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory, the national government introduced a sweeping set of emergency measures, suspending laws guaranteeing equal access to alcohol and prerogatives over spending welfare payments on the part of Aboriginal people (Australian Government 2007). Many of these laws remain in place today, and continue to generate controversy (Australian Government 2012).

Notwithstanding inquiries and policies, the statistical evidence points to continuing problems. Between 2006-07 and 2007-08, Indigenous Australians aged 35-44 years were hospitalized for alcohol-related diagnoses at six times the rate of other Australians of the same age-group (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2011). The average age at death from alcohol-attributable causes among Aboriginal Australians is about 35 years (Chikritzhs, Pascal et al. 2007). On the ground, Alice Springs in 2012 bears a depressing resemblance to the picture recalled by the police officer from 1975. At an inquest into the death in custody of yet another young Aboriginal man on the night of 5 January 2012, the Northern Territory Police Association described the circumstances in which Kumanji Briscoe had been taken, intoxicated, into custody:

Such work is repeated every day, very many times over, in every town and city of the Northern Territory, every day of the year. It is a large part of policing. It consumes enormous cost and resources. Probationary Constable Gray described conditions in the Alice Springs watch-house in the summer as 'extremely difficult' because of the heat, the ambient smell, the odour of urine and faeces, and the screaming and shouting of persons who are very drunk¹. It is of such mind-numbing, desensitizing and soul-destroying work as to be heroic. The community demands that someone do this work, and it is Police who answer this call. But that it is necessary at all is because of the effects of alcohol, violence and the poverty and generational disadvantage on people, mainly Aboriginal. It has been going on for a long time. It is a stain on the character of the whole community of the Northern Territory. It is seen at every level of the community and, dare we say it, government, as a problem incapable of solution, and it might be said that the broader Territory community has turned off, shut it out, wishing it would go away. It is in particular, a problem at the very heart of Indigenous disadvantage. It is a problem so deeply entrenched that it leaves a large proportion of our community locked permanently into a spiral of hopelessness and the rest of the community, which remains largely well-intentioned, overcome with a sense of futility and helplessness (Northern Territory Police Association 2012).

In this paper I shall describe a policing 'road less travelled': a road that opens up a less 'mind-numbing, desensitizing and soul-destroying' alternative. In doing so, I do not discuss any alternative theories or models of policing, but simply describe some initiatives taken by three NT police officers who, in their own day-to-day practice, saw a need for a more strategic approach and, in collaboration with others in the local community, devised practical means to pursue it. Two of the officers concerned are still serving in the NT Police Service, a third retired in 2002. All of them agreed to be interviewed for this paper, and for their names to be published. Their examples, I suggest, point the way to a more productive, effective alternative to the decades-old cycle outlined above.

Example 1: policing and the birth of night patrols

The first example is the young man who was so dismayed by what he encountered in Alice Springs in 1975: Warren O'Meara². After about a year in Alice Springs, O'Meara was transferred to an even more remote station on Groote Eylandt, an island located around 600 km as the crow flies south-east of Darwin in the Gulf of Carpentaria. From here, two years later, he was again transferred to become the Officer-in-Charge of a one-man police station at Daly River, in the Top End of the NT. It was here that he began to develop an approach to policing that he was to take with him to other postings. The Aboriginal community of Daly River (today known as Nauiyu), located about 250 km from Darwin, was originally established as a Catholic mission on land occupied by the Malak Malak people (Catholic Church in the Northern Territory Diocese of Darwin

¹ Statements of Assistant Commissioner Mark Payne dated 6 June 2012 in paragraphs 2-4, 82-87, and 18 June 2012 at paragraph 4-11.

² The account of Warren O'Meara's activities that follows draws mainly on an interview conducted by the author on 11 October 2012.

2013). Like most Aboriginal communities in the NT, Daly River was legally a 'dry' community under a section of the NT Liquor Act that enables communities to apply to the Liquor Commission to have special restrictions – including, if the community wishes, a complete ban – placed on possession or consumption of alcohol in the community.

The police station to which O'Meara had been posted was located about 5 km from the Daly River community, and just a few hundred metres from a pub that served travellers, fishing enthusiasts – and drinkers from the nearby Aboriginal community. Prior to O'Meara's arrival, two elders from the community had obtained use of a vehicle and initiated a patrol in order to stop people from coming back into the community drunk and causing disruption. Most of the time they were able to manage on their own, but at times they had found that their own kin-based links to the people they were attempting to manage constrained their capacity to intervene. They turned to O'Meara for assistance; he found himself, as a result, exercising his own authority in collaboration with the cultural authority of the elders. The combination worked: O'Meara's status as an outsider, which in other circumstances might have been a handicap, here strengthened the authority and effectiveness of the patrol service.

In 1984 O'Meara was promoted to Inspector and transferred to the town of Katherine, 320 km south of Darwin. Like all towns in the NT by this time, Katherine was experiencing the consequences of a heavy drinking culture. (Per capita consumption of alcohol in the NT has long remained at least 50% higher than in Australia as a whole. In 1986-87, for example, apparent per capita consumption of pure alcohol by persons aged 15 years and over in the NT was 20.3 litres, compared with 11.2 litres nationally (d'Abbs 1991).) Heavy drinking is by no means restricted to Aboriginal Territorians, but it was the visible public binge drinking and drunkenness among the latter that posed the most immediate challenges to policing, not to mention to inter-racial harmony in the town. O'Meara became involved in attempts to develop a pro-active rather than reactive response, attending meetings of Katherine Town Council and the Kalano Association, an Aboriginal organization based in Katherine, with responsibility for managing Aboriginal town camps and other housing in the town, and for providing a range of local services. Kalano had expressed interest in establishing a night patrol along the lines of the one operating in Daly River, and O'Meara contributed his experience. In the event, the patrol did not eventuate – at least not before O'Meara was again transferred in 1988, this time to the town of Tennant Creek, another 700 km further south, on the Stuart Highway that connects Darwin with Alice Springs.

Tennant Creek at this time boasted a population of around 3,000, 56% of whom (in 2006) were Indigenous (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2008). Founded as a gold-mining town, it has long been a centre of community action around alcohol (Wright 2010). Indeed, local legend has it that in the 1930s the intended site for the town was moved south to where a beer truck on its way north had become bogged (Brady 1988). By the time O'Meara arrived there, alcohol problems were, in his words, 'in your face'. O'Meara recalls that Telecom – the then government-owned telecommunications monopoly - had even installed what it hoped were unbreakable public phones with one-way facilities to

enable women in town camps to call police for help in the face of alcohol-fuelled violence. Some local women had also got together and armed themselves with long clubs known as *nulla nullas* for self-protection, and taken to walking around the camps, trying to resolve disputes and prevent the drunks from wreaking havoc. When things got out of hand they would call the police.

O'Meara, with his experiences of Daly River and Katherine behind him, was looking for better solutions. So too was the Julalikari Association, a Tennant Creek-based organization that provided multiple services for local Aboriginal people. O'Meara was invited to attend meetings of the Julalikari Association. It was within this collaborative context that the first fully-structured night patrol in Australia was established, under the auspices of the Julalikari Council, in 1988. Dave Curtis, then General Manager of Julalikari Council and one of the founders of the night patrol, later described the patrol as a service based on a roster of carefully selected council members, who worked in a voluntary capacity 'to resolve problems in town camps and special purpose leases; to settle disputes when they begin and not after they have exploded, drawing in extended families or entire tribal groups' (Curtis 1993, p.75). Curtis insisted that, contrary to some descriptions, the night patrol was *not* simply an auxiliary service for picking up drunks and taking them home or to a place of protection, thereby easing the burden on police.

In 1991 the role of the Julalikari Night Patrol was formally documented in an Agreement on Practices and Procedures between the NT Police and Julalikari Council (Northern Territory Police Service and Julalikari Council Inc. 1991). Under the Agreement, Julalikari undertook to provide patrollers with a suitably identified vehicle and, in cooperation with police, St John Ambulance and the Barkly Region Alcohol and Drug Abuse Advisory Group (BRADAAG), to train patrollers. In the event of a disturbance involving Aboriginal people arising in the town, the Night Patrol would in the first instance attempt to resolve it; should it be unable to do so it would call the Police, who would come to the assistance of the Patrol. Wherever possible, Police would consult with the Patrol on the nature and causes of the problem and on the most appropriate course of action. Should Police deem it appropriate, they could leave matters in the hands of the Night Patrol. Where necessary, either Police or the Night Patrol could take intoxicated individuals to the local sobering-up shelter. Police cells were to be used only as a last resort (Northern Territory Police Service and Julalikari Council Inc. 1991).

The Julalikari Council Night Patrol subsequently won a national Prevention of Violence award, and became a model for similar services elsewhere. Today, Aboriginal night patrols – renamed 'community patrols' – have become absorbed into a national program administered and funded through the Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department (Beacroft, Richards et al. 2011). There are probably costs as well as benefits entailed: on the one hand, community patrols have finally been lifted out of the chronically precarious funding environments in which they struggled for too long. On the other – as

one Aboriginal writer, Alexis Wright, has observed in a 2nd edition of her account of Tennant Creek's efforts to overcome its grog problems - the formalization and bureaucratization of the program may well have vitiated the element of local community control which many patrols epitomized (Wright 2010). Be that as it may, the point to be made here is that the evolution of the Julalikari Night Patrol in Tennant Creek was a product of local Aboriginal initiative supported strategically by a community-oriented police officer.

Around this time O'Meara was transferred back to Katherine, where he continued working with Aboriginal organizations, local councils and other agencies toward more effective solutions to the town's alcohol problems. One such initiative involved convening a meeting in the small town of Mataranka, a little over 100 km to the south of Katherine, which then evolved into regular meetings bringing together representatives of communities across the Katherine region. Significantly, when O'Meara was finally transferred out of Katherine back to Darwin, the Convenor of the Combined Katherine Aboriginal Organizations, Mick Peirce, commented publicly that 'Warren is one of very few enlightened thinkers within the police department. He's going to leave a pretty big hole' *(still need to locate date for this quotation)*.

O'Meara retired from the NT Police in 2002 and in the following year was awarded the Australian Police Medal. While Peirce's somewhat backhanded compliment about there being 'very few enlightened thinkers' no doubt contained an important truth, O'Meara was of course not unique.

Example 2: alcohol as a 'wicked problem'

Kym Davies at the time of writing this paper was Commander of Southern Command, NT Police, headquartered in Alice Springs. He too drew some of his earliest lessons from having to run the one-man police station at Daly River, having been posted there in 1990, about 12 years after O'Meara's sojourn. Things had not improved in the interim. The pub, he says now, was an 'absolute disgrace' – owned by an ex-policeman who knew all the rules and regulations.

They knew to fill these blokes up enough so they weren't outside their licence conditions, sell them a couple of cartons of grog and send them on their way. And I would literally be fighting every night.³

His predecessor had had what Davies called 'a no drop policy, and his cells were always full'. He'd also had to deal with riots and attacks on the police station. Davies opted for a different approach. One of the first things he did was to ask three elders to help him make sure that local drinkers consumed their takeaway alcohol within a designated area

³ Interview, with Kym Davies, NTPFES, 11 October 2012

– known as the Mango Tree – instead of taking it back into the community of Daly River which was, as it had been in O’Meara’s time, legally ‘dry’. Davies knew that most community residents wanted grog to be kept out of the community. The elders, at first hesitant, quickly took to displaying their authority – complete with spears and boomerangs – and insisting that all the drinking be confined to the designated area. Through what Davies believes the elders experienced as an empowering process, they subsequently extended their social control functions to other aspects of alcohol-related behavior in the community, such as men throwing rocks on the roof of the women’s shelter in bids to force their wives to come out.

Davies attaches considerable importance to engaging with communities in the search for solutions to what he calls the ‘wicked problem’ of grog. Derived from the social policy literature, the term ‘wicked problem’ refers to social problems that are by definition ill-defined, beyond the capacity of any single agency to address, and inter-connected with many other, equally intractable issues (Rittel and Webber 1973). But engaging with communities, he adds,

is not about just having a blue light disco as it was in my time, eg every Saturday night at Daly River, but actually sitting down with communities and working through some of those wicked problems.

It involves, in his words, having ‘conversations with Aboriginal people about it, conversations *with* them, not to them, working in the right space, allowing Aboriginal people to have a voice in the solutions’. Davies argues that this willingness has been a long time coming to the police force, and that there are many who still see it as peripheral to the real business of policing: locking up offenders – and leaving someone else to make the decisions about what else should be done. But change, in his view, is afoot. One innovation that in his view helped to usher in change was a Juvenile Diversion Scheme set up in the NT in the 1990s. The scheme encouraged police to start examining *why* some young people had done the things they had apparently done. It also fostered a collaborative approach to identifying alternatives to simply locking people up.

As it happens, the police officer behind the third example in this paper was also influenced by a six-month stint with the Juvenile Diversion Scheme before being posted as relieving Senior Sergeant to Groote Eylandt in 2002.

Example 3: developing the Groote Eylandt Liquor Management Plan

Groote Eylandt, as already indicated, is remote even by NT standards. The island is home to three Aboriginal communities – Angurugu (population approximately 1200), Umbakumba (population approximately 325) and Milyakburra, located on nearby Bickerton Island, with a population of just 200. It is also the site of a large manganese mine operated by GEMCO, a subsidiary of BHP Billiton, and the associated mining town of Alyangula (population around 800). The GEMCO mine was established in the 1960s,

under an agreement with traditional owners that required GEMCO to minimize adverse impacts on local Aboriginal communities, in particular the impact of alcohol (Conigrave, Proude et al. 2007).

Despite these good intentions, and a series of attempts over the years by local communities to limit access to alcohol, by the mid 1980s Groote Eylandt was reported to have one of the highest per capita imprisonment rates in the world, most of it directly attributable to alcohol misuse (Conigrave, Proude et al. 2007). At the time, alcohol could be purchased on the island from three outlets: two clubs located in Alyangula and, in the north of the island, from an outlet in Umbakumba that sold limited quantities of beer to members of the community. During the 1990s, the Angurugu Community Council had made it clear to the two licensed clubs that it would oppose club membership being extended to any residents of Angurugu.

By 2002, when Tony Fuller arrived on Groote Eylandt as relieving Senior Sergeant, the situation was, in his words, 'pretty bad'⁴. Shortly after arriving, Fuller was approached by Walter Amagula, an elder on the island who was also Chairman of the Anindilyakwa Land Council (ALC), a body established under the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act (1976) and charged with responsibility for matters relating to land held in trust for the traditional owners of the Groote Eylandt archipelago (Clough, Smith et al. 2005). Amagula sought Fuller's help in devising and policing a scheme to overcome two particularly critical problems: the first concerned the 30 or so local Aboriginal people who were employees of the GEMCO mine and, as a result, living in company houses in Alyangula. Many of them were being subjected to intense pressure by relatives and others to provide alcohol – and a place to drink it. As a result, the employees themselves were often failing to turn up to work, their homes were becoming drinking camps, and their neighbors were complaining. The second problem was an illicit grog trade, in which individuals legally purchased up to seven or eight cartons of takeaway beer from the clubs and then supplied them to other drinkers who would congregate in so-called 'bush clubs' around Angurugu, get drunk, and go back into Angurugu community causing violence and other disruption.

Shortly before Fuller's arrival on the island, women from Angurugu had called a public meeting and asked ALC and GEMCO to act to reduce the levels of alcohol-related violence in the community. Amagula had subsequently consulted with Mr Rick Peters, then GEMCO Community Liaison Officer, and together these two sought support from Fuller. Fuller's first response was to turn to the NT Licensing Commission in Darwin for assistance. According to Fuller, the NTLC at this stage showed little interest, claiming that the problem was essentially one for the community to resolve.

Between them, Amagula, Peters and Fuller then devised a scheme, under which Aboriginal GEMCO employees could voluntarily subject themselves to takeaway purchase limits. These limits would be written into a letter, carrying the imprimatur of the NT Police, and the employees could use this letter as a basis for declining to supply liquor to others on the grounds that they were forbidden by law from doing so. The

⁴ Interview with Tony Fuller, NTPFES, 10 October 2012.

scheme, as Fuller pointed out, had no legal basis, a point not lost on the clubs themselves. It was, essentially, a grand exercise in bluffing.

It didn't work; even the Aboriginal employees concerned, who were in general strongly supportive of the idea, had no compunction in repudiating it when they felt an urge to purchase larger amounts than the 'permit' authorized. While this system was in place, a committee was formed with representatives from ALC, local Community Councils, police, GEMCO, health services, and liquor licensees. Fuller was asked by the committee to prepare a draft plan for further discussion (Conigrave, Proude et al. 2007).

Over the next two years, Fuller in fact produced no fewer than 12 draft plans, all of them developing and refining an innovative new system, under which takeaway alcohol could be purchased only by individuals who had a permit to do so, for consumption in designated places only. The system was universal – that is, it was to apply to non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal people alike, with authority to recommend the granting, modifying and suspending of permits to be vested in a local permit committee. It was called the Groote Eylandt Liquor Management Plan (GELMP).

In 2004 the NT Licensing Commission, which by now had become more engaged with the initiative, conducted the first of several public hearings at which it sought to ascertain the views of a wide range of stakeholders regarding the proposed system (Clough, Smith et al. 2005). As a result of these meetings, in the course of which the NTLC satisfied itself that the proposed GELMP enjoyed widespread support, the Commission in May 2005 announced its decision to formally endorse the Plan, which henceforth enjoyed the status of NT Law under the NT Liquor Act.

Fuller, by this time, had been transferred from Groote Eylandt to Nhulunbuy, another, larger mining town in north-eastern Arnhem Land, surrounded by one major Aboriginal community (Yirrkala, 20 minutes drive from Nhulunbuy) and several small communities. Looking back on his Groote Eylandt experience in the interview conducted for this paper, Fuller drew a number of conclusions from it: one was that developing community alcohol initiatives is a slow process, requiring patience; it took 2 ½ years for the permit system to evolve from a proposal to a formally adopted scheme. One reason for the slowness, in his view, is that governments generally are slow and sometimes reluctant to recognize genuine community initiatives, in contrast to the enthusiasm with which they push their own ideas. Another was the need to be willing to stand firm in face of criticism when one knows that the majority of people in the community are supportive. In the case of the GELMP, some non-Aboriginal residents were vehemently opposed to the notion that *they*, as well as Aboriginal people, should require permits to purchase alcohol. Fuller believed that only a universal scheme would be viewed by most people as being fair and equitable.

A third lesson he drew was the need for flexibility. As he points out, the scheme as finally implemented was not the one he himself had in mind. Whereas he had envisaged that many Aboriginal people would be granted permits to drink takeaway alcohol in their own homes, the women at Angurugu remained adamant that no liquor was to be brought into the community. He respected that decision.

All of these lessons were to prove relevant in Fuller's new posting, where local groups and communities were grappling with problems similar to those on Groote Eylandt. At the time of Fuller's arrival in 2005, a local group known as the East Arnhem Harmony Mâyawa Mala Inc (Harmony Group for short) had brought together traditional owners, other senior Yolngu and non-Yolngu people, and government and non-government agencies, to develop a "cooperative and coordinated regional approach to strategies, projects and initiatives with particular emphasis on law and social justice development, substance misuse, itinerant issues and the prevention of crime" (Wearne, Greatorex et al. 2006, p.22). The Harmony Group had heard of the Groote Eylandt permit system and was interested in adapting it to the local region. Fuller was invited to attend meetings of the Group itself, and of the Licensing Commission. On one occasion, he recalls, he prepared a presentation that simply documented every known alcohol-related fatality and serious incident in the area over the preceding two years – showing the places, and the flowers or other memorials.

The Harmony Group embraced the idea of a permit system. This led to a period of intensive and widespread consultation with stakeholders including, besides Aboriginal communities, the mining company, unions, licensees. While not everyone supported the idea – one licensee, according to Fuller, was 'a bit of a problem', and some of Fuller's police colleagues were less than enthusiastic – Fuller believes that there was a broad foundation of support throughout the region.

Then, in 2006, the NT Department of Justice intervened. Around this time the Department had adopted a 'Community Safety Model' for dealing with alcohol problems⁵. Despite clear evidence that the Nhulunbuy Harmony Group had already engaged in extensive community consultation in connection with its proposed permit system, the Department insisted on engaging an independent consultant to gauge community views. The Harmony Group was, in effect, sidelined, as a team of outsiders comprising Wearne Advisers and the School of Australian Indigenous Knowledge Systems from Charles Darwin University in Darwin, conducted its own inquiry. Not surprisingly, the consultants found evidence of support for, and recommended, a permit system (Wearne, Greatorex et al. 2006).

Finally, on 17 December 2007, the NT Licensing Commission, in response to a formal joint application by the Harmony Group and NT Police, agreed to impose a set of measures under which possession and consumption of takeaway liquor anywhere in a designated area would be permissible only for people who had a permit to purchase takeaway liquor. On-premise sales in existing licensed premises were not affected. The permit system was to be overseen by three local permit committees based in Nhulunbuy, and the communities of Yirrkala and Gunyangara respectively, and empowered to grant, refuse or revoke applications for permits and to place additional conditions on the amounts and kinds of liquor that could be purchased. Operation of the system was to be facilitated through an 'Alcohol Management System' designed and supplied by ID Tect Pty Ltd, a software development company. Each takeaway outlet

⁵ My own inquiries have failed to find any trace of the Community Safety Model, other than the phrase itself. One day, after searching, I remarked to a former politician that I couldn't believe that the Model was nothing more than a phrase dreamed up by a ministerial adviser, and was advised that it was precisely that.

was to be given a computer node linked to a central server in Darwin, where all permit information was to be stored. The new system was to take effect from 1 March 2008 (Northern Territory Licensing Commission 2007).

Both the Groote Eylandt Liquor Management Plan and the Gove Peninsula Alcohol Management System were subjected to independent evaluations. Evaluation of the former found that on most indicators, the scheme was clearly successful (Conigrave, Proude et al. 2007). For instance, incidents involving aggravated assaults fell by 67% in the year following introduction of the GELMP to their lowest level in four years. House break-ins dropped by 86% in the year following the GELMP. There was also a marked reduction in disturbances, which fell 60% from 2004-05 to 2005-06. Over the same period public drunkenness declined by 75%. Work attendance was also said to have improved among GEMCO's Indigenous employees, with absenteeism falling from 7.8% in the 12 months leading up to 1st July 2005 to 2.4% for the subsequent 12 months. Wholesale supplies of alcohol to Groote Eylandt outlets declined by 9% in beverage volume between 2004-05 and 2005-06.

The scheme also appeared to enjoy community support, although survey findings did not yield robust findings. Aboriginal residents reported anecdotal comments such as:

Before there was violence. Women scared, children scared. Children growing up seeing violence.

Since the alcohol has stopped, the men who used to be drinkers and used to be violent are going hunting. Taking their children hunting. Getting good food.

Attempts to survey community opinion were vitiated by low response rates. A survey of all residents conducted by GEMCO in March 2007 attracted only 106 respondents (i.e. a 16% response rate), 72% of whom considered that implementation of the GELMP had been good or very good (Conigrave, Proude et al. 2007). A second, postal survey conducted by the evaluators yielded only 44 completed responses, showing a diversity of views. Neither survey can be taken as representative of community opinion.

Similarly, in Nhulunbuy and surrounding communities, the evaluation revealed that on almost all of the indicators used, introduction of the permit system was followed by a decline both in apparent liquor sales (down by 23.8% in the 12 months following introduction of permits) and in alcohol-related harm, especially in Indigenous alcohol-related presentations to the hospital emergency department (down by 22% over the same period) (d'Abbs, Shaw et al. 2011). A survey to gauge community views of the system found that a little over half of respondents (54.4%) supported the permit system, while 43.8% did not support it.

From Fuller's point of view, the Nhulunbuy experience demonstrated once again the reluctance of government agencies to support genuine community initiatives and a corresponding desire to control local change processes. At the same time, the system that evolved in this case came closer to what he had had in mind for Groote Eylandt, in that both Aboriginal community permit committees – in Yirrkala and Gunyangara – utilized their authority to grant approved residents permits to drink in their homes,

thereby shifting responsibility for managing access to alcohol away from the government, towards the communities themselves.

Conclusions

So what conclusions should we take from these three examples? The first and most obvious, I suggest, is that the collaborative, pro-active, problem-solving stance adopted by each of these officers yielded more impressive results than the endless cycle of rounding up drunks that has dominated policing activity not only in Alice Springs but throughout the towns of the NT for several decades. A second conclusion is that in all of these instances, the involvement of police *made a crucial difference*. In each of the examples discussed above, other groups and other individuals were already grappling with the damage caused by alcohol misuse, and had come to the conclusion that they needed the distinctive combination of authority and experience that only police can bring to a situation.

A third lesson is that the capacity of police to adopt such a stance requires a number of personal qualities, notably a willingness to listen to other people, respect their perspectives, and have faith that solutions generated through real community collaboration will probably work. At the same time – and this is a fourth conclusion – this sort of community policing is bound to incur resistance, both from other police who see it as unorthodox and from others, such as some licensees, with a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. Finally, these examples suggest that one would be unwise to expect too much support from governments, despite their predilection for phrases like ‘community ownership’ and ‘empowerment’.

The extent to which these lessons can be incorporated into more institutionalized approaches to community engagement is for others to determine – but the examples are there.

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