



## Grog Wars

Jack Koci

**Many Cape York Indigenous communities** are dysfunctional and entrenched in a vicious cycle of domestic violence and sexual abuse. Health and education standards are appalling and they continue to deteriorate. Incarceration and suicide have become the norm. Life expectancy is at least 20 years lower than mainstream Australia. For men, average life expectancy is lower than 50 years.

The well-documented pack-rape case in Aurukun, the death in custody of Mulrunji Doomadgee and shocking alcohol-related health statistics have again raised the question, 'Do alcohol restrictions really work in remote communities?'

Queensland Premier Anna Bligh has considered a total alcohol ban in Indigenous communities after a review by the Queensland Government found alcohol-management plans are failing.

'Everything is on the table, from tightening up the restrictions in most places right through to total prohibition,' she said (Mancuso, 2008). The review found up to 70% of serious assaults and hospital admissions were alcohol-related, while breaches of domestic violence orders and hospital admissions had soared by up to 14% (Mancuso, 2008). Without a doubt, alcohol abuse is the most prominent social affliction and health issue in Aboriginal society.

It is important to acknowledge that these situations have nothing to do with Aboriginal culture or tradition. The causes of these problems are complex and can be traced backed to the effects of colonisation and government policy. However, it is

JACK KOCI

an undeniable fact that alcohol is inextricably linked to all of these social ills. Grog has a stranglehold on many within these remote communities; it is destroying families, splitting communities, breaking down language, culture and tradition. Most importantly, it is denying Indigenous youth a future. Ms Bligh is being forced to make some tough decisions. All arrows are pointing in one direction, and it's up to her to shoot them.

This is a major dilemma facing Aboriginal communities in the North and indeed right across Australia. Many argue total prohibition is necessary to restore order, to provide hope, for both present and future generations. Director of the Cape York Institute for Policy and Leadership, Noel Pearson, said, 'It's our responsibility for the grog and violence problems because it is the survival of our own people and culture that is at stake'. Many believe it's about finding a balance, between the needs and wellbeing of the community, and implementing legislation that actually works.

It has been shown in the past that legislation should not be 'rushed through'. There needs to be constant consultation with Aboriginal communities and continuous review of management plans, otherwise cracks always appear. Evidence from past management plans show that what doesn't work is total prohibition without effective communication between the Government and the community people (Seiwert, R, 2007). People always slip through the cracks, by smuggling grog into their community or resorting to other forms of drug use, such as petrol and glue sniffing.

In some cases people migrate to other communities where there are no alcohol restrictions. Different alcohol-management plans need to be implemented for individual communities, addressing the varying issues of that area. The government must also set up patient-rehabilitation facilities and provide professional support to these communities.

Coralee Ober, an Indigenous academic said, 'While I have no problem with controlling supply, you also have to put in demand-reduction programs, harm-reduction programs and look at early intervention programs'.

With all this talk of total prohibition in Indigenous communities, it raises the question of why Aboriginal communities should be subjected to such harsh policies, while a walk down 'the Valley' in Brisbane provides evidence of much the same violence among the non-Indigenous community. We live in a democracy, and it could be argued that the alcohol laws constitute a form of apartheid. Sam Watson, an anti-racism activist, claims 'Most non-Indigenous Australians generalise all Aboriginals as drunks, layabouts of society, while ignoring the problems caused by alcohol among their own race'.

Maggie Blackley, a councillor for Palm Island, points out the cause of the problem is the issue. 'With no essential services, terrible conditions, with regard to housing and employment, obviously that leads to people having too much time on their hands.' Alcohol restrictions can only work in the long term if education is improved and meaningful employment is available. When people are able to take control of their own lives they will stop their dependency on the state.

This complete dependency has been crippling these communities for several generations and the dysfunction we now see is the terrible price of failed policy. History has shown that government policy has failed Indigenous Australians. It is time for governments and the wider community to back those Indigenous leaders who have the courage and the vision to seriously grapple with this gravest problem.

In Cape York, and arguably Australia, this leadership is coming from Noel Pearson. His strategy to reduce the twin ravages of welfare dependency and the 'grog epidemic' is controversial, but slowly gaining support from other Indigenous leaders, governments and the corporate sector.

Pearson sees the corporate sector as essential to provide the skills and expertise to help Aboriginal people to deliver their strategies. Large corporations such as Westpac are stepping in and helping by providing their staff to live and work in Indigenous communities. They set up programs that seek to address education, improve financial literacy and promote economic development.

JACK KOCI

According to Westpac's Cape York Program manager Vit Koci, 'The success of our engagement is predicated on our policy of supporting Indigenous leadership and communities; we bring people with skills and desire to support Indigenous initiatives'.

The issue of alcohol abuse cannot continue to be swept under the carpet. It is a moral dilemma. Yes, it's an infringement on people's rights; however, people (especially children) have the right to live in a safe environment. This alcohol problem is a relatively recent phenomenon, and has grown exponentially over the past 30 years. Yet to come are the generations of Aboriginal youth born of alcoholic mothers. The implications for the survival of Aboriginal society are now ominous.

Noel Pearson said, 'We will not get on top of the problems that beset our communities if there is not a fundamental commitment by the Aboriginal community and governments to getting on top of the grog'. If Anna Bligh decides to implement total alcohol restrictions could it set the trend for the rest of the nation?

According to those directly involved such as Noel Pearson, the evidence is indisputable; alcohol prohibition on remote communities is essential. However, government and the community need to understand that prohibition alone is not enough; health, education, housing and meaningful employment also need to be addressed with the same vigour. Only then will we see a sustainable improvement and equity for the first Australians.

### **Bibliography**

- Mancuso. (2008). Bligh, mayors to discuss alcohol bans in far north. *Brisbane Times*. Retrieved February 25, 2008, from <http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/news/queensland/bligh-mayors-to-discuss-alcohol-bans-in-far-north/2008/02/06/1202233943506.html>
- McCutcheon, P. (2005). *Government reassesses alcohol restrictions in remote communities*. Retrieved February 23, 2008, from <http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2005/s1307921.htm>
- Pearson, N. (2008). *Noel Pearson quotes*. Retrieved February 23, 2008, from [http://www.daylife.com/topic/Noel\\_Pearson/quotes](http://www.daylife.com/topic/Noel_Pearson/quotes)

- Pearson, N. (2006). Good cause for panic. *The Age*. Retrieved February 23, 2008, from [http://150.theage.com.au/view\\_bestofarticle.asp?straction=update&inttype=1&intid=1117](http://150.theage.com.au/view_bestofarticle.asp?straction=update&inttype=1&intid=1117)
- Pearson, N. (2002). *Cape York substance abuse strategy*. Retrieved February 23, 2008, from [www.capeyorkpartnerships.com](http://www.capeyorkpartnerships.com)
- Seiwert, R. (2007). *Alcohol restrictions in Northern Territory*. Retrieved February 23, 2008, from [http://www.rachelsiewert.org.au/500\\_parliament\\_sub.php?deptItemID=127](http://www.rachelsiewert.org.au/500_parliament_sub.php?deptItemID=127)
- Porteous, M. (2008, February 13). Rudd, Nelson unite to tackle Aboriginal disadvantage. *Courier Mail*. Retrieved February 28, 2008, from <http://www.news.com.au/couriermail/story/0,23739,23208304-952,00.html>



**Jack Koci** wrote this in 2008 when he was in Year 12 at Mareeba State High School in Queensland.