

SUPPLYING AND PROMOTING 'GROG': THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF ALCOHOL IN ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIA

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The deleterious effects of alcohol misuse among Aboriginal Australians have been well documented and are widely acknowledged by Aboriginal people. However, most academic discussion has attempted to explain the demand for alcohol by Aboriginal people. In this review, we argue for an analysis of the political economy of Aboriginal alcohol use which also focuses on the supply and promotion of alcohol. Our own research and that of others demonstrates the utility of such an approach and the practical benefits it offers for harm minimisation strategies.

'Behind every blackfella gettin' drunk, there's a whitefella gettin' rich'
(anonymous).

Introduction

Over the past few years we have tried to explore the way in which the ill health of Aboriginal Australians can be explained by their position within the political economy of Australia (Sagers & Gray 1991a; Sagers & Gray 1991b; Gray & Sagers, 1994; Sagers 1994). In this process it has become increasingly clear that alcohol plays a very significant role in Aboriginal ill health.

Available evidence indicates that the pattern of drinking among Aboriginal peoples differs significantly from that found in the non-Aboriginal population (although perhaps not from some segments of it which occupy a similar social place in Australian society). Generally, the proportion of the Aboriginal population which does not consume alcohol is much larger than that among the non-Aboriginal population. However, among those

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Aboriginal people who do consume alcohol, more do so at harmful levels (Watson, Fleming & Alexander 1988; Hunter, Hall & Spargo 1992; Knowles & Woods 1993).

The deleterious health and social consequences of excessive Aboriginal alcohol consumption – that is, consumption at levels which causes harm to both individual drinkers and those around them – are well documented (Johnson 1991). It is responsible for an estimated 8-10% of Aboriginal deaths (Hicks 1985; A. Gray 1990; Unwin, Thomson & Gracey 1994) and contributes to high levels of morbidity. For example, in Western Australia, it has been shown that in the period 1981-1990 hospital admission rates for alcohol caused conditions were 8.6 times greater for Aboriginal men than for non-Aboriginal men, and 12.8 times greater for Aboriginal women than for non-Aboriginal women (Veroni, Swensen & Thomson 1993). Although the relationship is not linear, excessive alcohol consumption also contributes to unemployment, family breakdown, child neglect and school absenteeism (Johnson 1991). There is also widespread concern about the association between excessive alcohol consumption and violence in the home and other forms of intra- and inter-personal violence (d'Abbs, Hunter, Reser & Martin 1994).

The problems associated with the excessive consumption of alcohol by some sections of the Aboriginal population are not only of concern to non-Aboriginal people. For many Aboriginal Australians alcohol is unambiguously implicated in 'too much sorry business' (Langton 1991; 1992). Aboriginal people strongly expressed their concerns about the impact of excessive alcohol use to the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (Johnson 1991), and three quarters of those interviewed for the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Survey (Madden 1995) identified it as a health problem.

Various strategies have been developed to treat, minimise or prevent the harm caused by excessive alcohol consumption among Aboriginal people and much has been achieved (Brady 1990; Johnson 1991). However, we suggest that these strategies have been constrained by the theoretical eclecticism of the analyses of Aboriginal alcohol use that largely have left unexplored the political economy of alcohol use.

Explanations of Indigenous Alcohol Use

Few dispute the evidence of excessive alcohol consumption by some segments of the Aboriginal population and its direct and indirect consequences. However, as several reviews attest, there is little agreement on

the cause of such consumption (Alexander 1990; Brady 1991; d'Abbs, Hunter, Reser & Martin 1994; Johnson 1991; Kahn, Hunter, Heather & Tebbut 1991; Moore 1992). A variety of explanations for excessive consumption have been advanced. These include factors from one of four broad categories of determinants – biological, psychological, cultural, and structural – or combinations of them.

Among Aboriginal Australians, the least research has been conducted into the role of biological factors. There are biochemical and physiological factors which influence individual responses to alcohol and its metabolites (Mathews 1984). However, popular prejudice to the contrary, neither in Australia nor elsewhere among other indigenous peoples is there evidence that such differences explain population differences in either patterns of alcohol consumption or its consequences (Greeley & Gladstone 1989; Marinovich, Larsson & Barber 1976; Reed, Kalant, Gibbins *et al.* 1976). Similarly, in the Australian literature, psychological explanations *per se* have not been widely advocated. Where psychological factors have been invoked they are usually viewed as being consequential to other underlying factors. For example, Larsen (1980) sees alcohol abuse as reflecting 'a sense of maladjustment' as a result of non-Aboriginal discrimination.

It is within the cultural realm that the broadest range of 'determinants' of excessive consumption has been identified. One of the most commonly advocated of these explanations of Aboriginal patterns of alcohol consumption has been the purported breakdown of indigenous societies and cultures and consequent feelings of anomie and alienation (Albrecht 1974; Kamien 1978; Ward 1978). However, studies which have demonstrated the changing but resilient nature of Aboriginal cultures have made this explanation untenable (Keen 1988; Langton 1981). Included in this category of cultural explanations are those which emphasise historical factors such as the purported absence of social controls on alcohol consumption in traditional societies: the learning of patterns of excessive drinking from the representatives of non-indigenous society with whom they were most likely to come into contact, such as migratory workers; and the association of drinking and citizenship rights (Albrecht 1974; Bain 1974; Beckett 1965). More recent cultural explanations emphasise factors such as the use of drinking as: a means of expressing Aboriginal values such as individual autonomy; as a focus for group identity, solidarity, and resistance to non-Aboriginal society; and its use as a medium of social exchange (Brady and Palmer 1984; Collman 1979; Sackett 1988; Sansom 1980).

Structural explanations of excessive drinking emphasise the underlying importance of the dispossession of Aboriginal peoples and the continuing influence of colonialism, including poverty, exclusion from the mainstream economy and discrimination. Although there are numerous reports which cite the underlying importance of structural factors in the explanation of Aboriginal drinking (Leary, Dodson, Tipiloura and Bunduk 1975; House of Representatives 1977; National Aboriginal Health Strategy working Party 1989), apart from a review by Khoury (1989), there are none which systematically explore their role. Nevertheless, as Brady (1991) indicates, in support of broad structural explanations (as opposed to particularistic explanations focusing on the unique characteristics of Aboriginal peoples), similarities in patterns of consumption and alcohol related harm between indigenous peoples in Australia and those in other countries such as the United States are often cited.

These categories of explanation are often not exclusively invoked. Many employ models which explicitly theorise the relationships between particular sets of factors; others eclectically invoke a range of factors in loosely reasoned explanation.

While biological and psychological explanations do not comprise a large part of the academic literature, they nevertheless inform much of both professional practice and popular views of Aboriginal alcohol consumption. This is most evident in the 'disease model'. In the variations of this model, 'alcoholism' or the 'alcohol dependence syndrome' is seen as a pathological state of addiction with physiological and/or psychological origins. This model, developed and elaborated in the United States and Britain, is ideologically underpinned by a liberal, individual centred view of humankind and individual responsibility. While the model has been subject to academic critique, particularly for its neglect of cultural and broader social factors, it continues to be influential.

Based on the critique of the disease model, is the so-called 'public health model'. Following Zinberg (1984), proponents of this model emphasise the need to consider the drug (in this case alcohol) and its biochemical effects, the psychological state of the person using it, and the environment in which use takes place. In the area of Aboriginal studies, the most notable advocate of this approach has been Brady (1991). Clearly, attempts at a comprehensive explanation of Aboriginal drinking are to be applauded. However, the public health model suffers from the short comings of the general systems theory approach on which it is based. That is, it accords no theoretical priority to any one set of factors and hence provides no theoretically consistent

explanation of the inter-relationships between those factors, their relative importance, and excessive consumption (Harris 1979).

As anthropologists working from a political economy perspective, explanations giving primacy to structural factors are closest to our own. However, in our view these often share a serious short coming with the other approaches. That is, they usually seek to explain the reasons for the *excessive demand* for alcohol by some sections of the Aboriginal population. However, it is an economic axiom that the level of consumption is a function of both demand and *supply*.

Reviews of the general literature by Room (1984), Single (1988), and Holder (1994) demonstrate that with increases in the availability of alcohol, *per capita* consumption within populations increases, and that with increases in consumption there is an increase in alcohol-related health and social problems. Factors that affect the overall availability of alcohol include types of control systems, restrictions on distribution (i.e. trading hours/days, age limits, advertising), density of outlets, pricing and taxation; and these have been shown to have an impact on consumption not only by 'social' but also by 'heavy' drinkers (Single 1988). Furthermore, density of outlets is not simply a response to demand but also acts to stimulate it (Gruenewald, Millar and Treno 1993).

Few writers have addressed these issues in an Aboriginal context. When they are addressed, it is usually in the practical context of curbing Aboriginal demand, rather than as an independent factor in a theoretical model of excessive consumption. An adequate political economy of indigenous alcohol use needs to address the structural factors underlying both supply and demand, and to situate psycho-social factors within that explanatory framework.

The Political Economy of Alcohol

The political economy perspective to which we have referred places individuals and social and cultural phenomena 'within an examination of the circumstances associated with getting a living and the structures of power that shape and constrain activity' (Roseberry 1988:179). That is, while acknowledging the role of biology, individual psychology and culture in determining human behaviour these are theorised as shaped and constrained by broader political economic factors.

The first to apply such an approach to the study of alcohol use was Engels (1854/1969) who demonstrated the political and economic

determinants of heavy drinking among the working classes in nineteenth century England. Singer (1986) identified six specific insights in Engels' work:

- abusive drinking is both a health and social problem;
- alcohol consumption is influenced by social conditions;
- social drinking can be an act of class solidarity;
- consumption rates and the level of related problems are linked to availability of alcohol;
- the state either promotes or facilitates the availability of alcohol; and,
- producers view the alcohol market as an expandable arena for profit-making.

In a review of the anthropological and related social science literature, Singer argued that failure to address the range of issues raised in this political economy approach was a serious impediment to understanding excessive alcohol use, especially among indigenous peoples and in third world countries. He also argued for the need to go beyond Engels and to look at issues such as the use of alcohol as a labour control mechanism and the focus on 'alcoholism' in biomedical and related treatment. According to Singer, a political economy of alcohol use should be concerned with:

[...] the larger structures, patterns and processes that create the settings, bring into being social groups, produce and promote the intoxicants, and generate the motivations for prodigious consumption (1986, p.116).

These understandings have informed alcohol studies among the general population in Australia (Sargent 1988). However, while non-Aboriginal researchers have parenthetically referred to the role of multi-national alcohol corporations in the supply and marketing of beer and cheap wine (Brady 1990), there has been no sustained examination of this and related issues.

Nevertheless, some Aboriginal people are demonstrating a broader understanding of the issues. In NSW the Aboriginal Legal Service, on behalf of three Aboriginal 'alcoholics', mounted a claim against the Commonwealth Government and Australian alcohol companies on the basis that the companies had encouraged them to drink alcohol and that the Commonwealth had failed to properly control its manufacture and distribution (Blackshield 1991). The case was subsequently rejected by the NSW Supreme Court in May 1992. However, similar cases are exploring the fiduciary duty of care the Commonwealth has to Aboriginal people and they reflect a growing consciousness among Aboriginal people that drinking is part of a wider

network of political and economic relationships that need to be made explicit (Langton 1993).

The political economy approach we advocate directs attention away from Aboriginal people to the wider network of relationships in which their lives are lived. It directs attention from a focus on Aboriginal demand for alcohol towards questions of how demand is created and how supply of alcohol is promoted. In the following sections, we focus on two aspects of this: the role of both the alcohol industry and the state in promoting alcohol consumption; and attempts to reduce excessive consumption through limiting the availability of alcohol. In doing so, we highlight a growing number of studies – some acknowledging many of the core understandings of a political economy of alcohol – which can contribute to such an approach.

Profit Seeking by the Alcohol Industry

Marcia Langton sees the focus on the misuse of alcohol by Aboriginal people in Australia as part of a colonial construct of the 'drunken Aborigine' which:

[...] glosses over the economic facts of the distribution of alcohol. The icon also deprives the set of problems involved in the misuse of alcohol by Aboriginal people of the contradictions, ambiguities and subtleties to do with the social use of alcohol in Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal societies. The 'drunken Abo' does not require that the economic and political factors which lead to and perpetuate the misuse of alcohol be understood or that any theoretical approach which might include such questions as 'Who benefits from the distribution of alcohol to Aboriginal people? Who profits?' be developed. Such questions are quite simply unnecessary to the discourse of racial superiority (Langton 1993, p.199).

Clearly, although they are not the only ones to do so, those who profit most directly from the sale of alcohol to Aboriginal people are those who produce and those who sell alcohol, and increases in those profits are primarily dependent upon increases in consumption.

It is in the interest of national and multi-national producers of alcoholic beverages to increase consumption of their products in all segments of the market. However, as Aboriginal people comprise only a small segment of the national market they are not directly targeted in alcohol promotions. Rather, it is at regional and local levels, where Aboriginal people represent a larger market segment that direct promotion, by retailers, takes place¹.

A study of the use of sex shows to sell alcohol in Tennant Creek provides some answers to Langton's questions (Boffa, George & Tsey 1994). A decline in the town's economic fortunes following the closure of the meatworks and downturns in mining in the mid-1980s led to increased promotion by local licensees to attract a share of the reduced market. The Tennant Creek Hotel, historically a place for Aboriginal drinkers, was bought out in 1987 by Australian Frontier Holidays which had previously used sex shows to promote alcohol sales elsewhere in Australia. Sex shows in the Tennant Creek Hotel included live sex acts, audience participation and the presence of under-age drinkers. Although there is little evidence that the shows targeted Aboriginal people specifically, the presence of only one other hotel and the large Aboriginal patronage of the Tennant Creek Hotel led many Aboriginal people to believe they were the objects of a concerted campaign.

An anti-sex show coalition of local politicians, Aboriginal elders, public health practitioners, Anyinginyi (the local Aboriginal controlled health service) board members and others were pitted against miners, cattlemen, hotel owners and others who wanted the shows to continue. Hotel owners bowed to public opinion only after adverse publicity seriously affected the national image of Australian Frontier Holidays and led to local boycotts of the hotel. Subsequent changes to the Liquor Act

[...] made it compulsory for licensees to warn the public that the shows were on, to conduct them behind closed doors, not to allow audience participation and to keep a specific distance between the strippers and audience (Boffa *et al.* 1994, p.363).

The importance of the action, for our purposes, is the clear connection made by Aboriginal and other participants between the availability of alcohol and alcohol-related problems, and the perceived need to identify those instances where the profit motives of the liquor industry are opposed to the public interests of Aboriginal individuals and groups. Subsequent to this action, an interagency group formed a 'Beat the Grog' campaign and resolved to: oppose new liquor licenses and alcohol sales promotion; demand strict enforcement of laws on under-age drinking and sale of alcohol to intoxicated people; and support grog-free concerts, further reduction in trading hours, and the declaration of more alcohol-free living areas in communities (Boffa *et al.* 1994, p.364).

The sex show debate was part of broader concerns over alcohol in Aboriginal communities. In response to this wider debate, the Northern

Territory government established a Sessional Committee on the Use and Abuse of Alcohol by the Community. The Committee's recommendation that a special liquor tax be introduced was adopted by the Northern Territory Legislative Assembly, raising 10 million dollars annually for alcohol prevention, rehabilitation and treatment programs. Aboriginal and other community groups have subsequently benefited from these funds (Boffa *et al.* 1994, p.364).

Recent research by one of us (DG) in Western Australia with Aboriginal community-controlled agencies identified a number of other strategies used by local suppliers of alcohol to increase their market share among Aboriginal patrons. These included sales to minors and intoxicated persons, credit sales, promotion of low cost high alcohol beverages, early trading, and reduction of costs by not providing appropriate levels of amenity on their premises (Gray, Drandich, Moore, Wilkes, Riley and Davies 1995). These practices were not investigated in detail and there is a real need for local level studies of the way in which alcohol is promoted and sold to Aboriginal patrons.

The Role of the State

The role of the state (that is the legislative, judicial and administrative arms of the federal and state/territory governments) with regard to the consumption of alcohol among Aboriginal people cannot be considered apart from its broader roles. From colonial times the Australian state has 'mobilised public resources for private gain' (Davis, Wanna, Warhurst and Weller 1988, p.15). That is, the state has acted to promote the interests and development of the private sector. Despite the rhetoric of aggrieved or extreme advocates of private enterprise, no government has acted in a contrary manner. However, it has not done so in an untrammelled way. In order to maintain its legitimacy, the state must be seen to be responsive to the concerns and welfare of a broader constituency.

Since the establishment of the first British colony in Australia, the state has provided encouragement and support to the alcohol industry (or sections of it). It has done so in the interests of the industry itself and because of the revenue the state obtains through various forms of taxation, licensing fees, and excise duties. Nevertheless, the state has had to balance competing interests and at various times has acted to curb levels of alcohol consumption. Such restrictions have been put in place when levels of consumption and its consequences have been perceived by sections of the private sector as threatening the productivity of workers, as being a disproportionate cost to

government and/or tax-payers, or as being disruptive of social life. When such threats have receded, restrictions have been relaxed (Lewis 1992).

At times such as the present when the service industries are increasingly dominating the economy, the support by the state for the liquor industry has been particularly explicit. For example, the stated objectives of the Western Australian *Liquor Licensing Act 1988* include:

- to regulate and contribute to the proper development of the liquor, hospitality and related industries in the State;
- to cater for the requirements of the tourism industry; (and)
- to facilitate the use and development of licensed facilities [...]

Such legislation provides a framework which facilitates efforts by various segments of the alcohol industry to vigorously promote and sell their products. The thrust of this legislation is to regulate the industry *per se* (rather than the impact of alcohol on the community) and to ensure its economic viability. Furthermore, various provisions of the Western Australian legislation purportedly designed to facilitate community input actually serve to hinder community attempts to restrict the availability of alcohol. Such provisions include measures for advertising license applications which are inaccessible to particular groups, especially Aborigines, and cumbersome procedures for the lodging of complaints (see Gray *et al* 1995, for further details).

Aboriginal Affairs Policy

As well as its policies with regard to the promotion of the private sector in general and the alcohol industry in particular, when examining the role of the state with regard to Aboriginal alcohol consumption, it is also necessary to consider specific policy towards Aboriginal alcohol consumption and broader Aboriginal affairs policy. In the past 200 years the state has had, and continues to have, a significant role in the lives of Aboriginal people – even attempting to define who is and who is not Aboriginal and the degree of Aboriginality. While not completely successful in its aims, for most of this period the state has sought to impose limitations on availability of alcohol to Aboriginal peoples.

In the nineteenth century, it was the official policy of the British colonial governments that the interests of Aboriginal people should be 'protected' (although the meaning of this was limited). Part of this protection included prohibition of the supply of alcohol to Aboriginal people and various pieces of legislation were passed giving effect to this (Brady 1990; Eggleston 1974;

Lewis 1992). Such prohibition was not all altruistic, in part it was a response to the colonists' fears and sensibilities about the behaviour of intoxicated Aboriginal people.

Despite official policy, however, Langton has shown how alcohol was used

'[...] unconsciously or consciously as a device for seducing Aboriginal people to engage economically, politically and socially with the colony' (1993, p. 201).

Brady also cites accounts of early colonial life where Europeans enticed Aborigines with alcohol so that they would fight or provide sex (Brady 1990). Furthermore, again in the interests of the private sector, in Western Australia early prohibition on the supply of alcohol to Aboriginal people specifically excluded employers who were permitted to pay Aboriginal employees with alcohol rather than wages (McCorquodale 1987).

From the 1920s through to the 1960s, access to alcohol was a potent symbol in the attempt by various governments to assimilate Aboriginal people. Among the benefits of citizenship granted to those who limited their contact with other Aboriginal people and who adopted a European life-style was the 'right' to purchase and consume alcohol. Conversely, withdrawal of citizenship was a sanction imposed on those who were frequently inebriated or who used their right of citizenship to purchase alcohol for others (Biskup 1973; Brady 1990).

In the 1960s, as a consequence of Aboriginal resistance to assimilation, increased international scrutiny and dominance of liberal ideology, Australian governments began the repeal of legislation which restricted the rights of Aboriginal people and adopted the policies first of integration and then self-determination/self-management. These legislative and policy changes included the provision of the right to vote in 1962, constitutional amendment to count Aboriginal people as Australian citizens in 1967, and relaxation of restrictions on the availability of alcohol to Aboriginal people. (It should be noted, however, that at least in Western Australia there remain in force legal provisions against street and park drinking which impact disproportionately against Aboriginal people (Gray *et al.* 1995)). Given the historical connection between citizenship and the right to consume alcohol, and the temporal juxtaposition of these legislative changes, many Aboriginal people came to regard alcohol consumption almost as an obligation of citizenship and is itself an important factor in Aboriginal consumption patterns (Brady 1990).

Elsewhere we have argued that, despite attempts at amelioration, the ill-health of Aboriginal people is a direct consequence of Aboriginal affairs policy and practice (Saggers and Gray 1991b; Gray and Saggers 1994). Similarly, the excessive consumption of alcohol and resultant harm among Aboriginal people is a consequence of the same policies. Those policies have created the groups and the conditions which have had the indirect consequence of promoting consumption through the stimulation of excessive demand for alcohol.

The excessive demand for alcohol among sections of the Aboriginal population is recognised by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people as linked to colonial relations of dependence, and powerlessness (Brady & Palmer 1984; Collman 1988; Kahn, Hunter, Heather & Tebbutt 1991), experiences shared by indigenous peoples the world over (Brady 1991; 1992).

Tangentyere (Council) recognises that alcohol abuse is only a symptom of an even more profound distress in contemporary Aboriginal life which flows directly from people's experiences of colonisation, their brutal dispossession and removal from traditional lands and from continuing assaults on their culture and community (Lyon 1990, p.14).

Apart from the dispossession of Aboriginal people and their marginalisation from the dominant economy, colonialism in Australia created different levels of Aboriginal sociality and these creations have exacerbated the consumption of drinking and its control. For example, Aboriginal people from different language and clan groups were herded into government settlements run by welfare authorities or missionaries, and subsequently came to be known as 'communities' (Long 1970). Most of these settlements were marginalised economically, socially and politically from mainstream society. Aboriginal people from these so-called communities in Western Australia, South Australia and the Northern Territory subsequently formed the nucleus of heavy drinking camps with associated high levels of alcohol related harm (Sackett 1988; Brady & Palmer 1984; Brady 1988).

Control of Availability

While Aboriginal affairs policy has had the presumably unintended consequence of promoting alcohol consumption and, over the past three decades, legislative change has had the effect of increasing the availability of alcohol to Aboriginal people, some sections of Aboriginal communities have sought to reduce excessive consumption through controls on the availability

of alcohol. These attempts highlight ideological differences within both Aboriginal communities and the wider society, and the ambiguous role of the state.

The issue of the rights and responsibilities associated with alcohol and citizenship have been thoughtfully addressed by Rowse (1993). Using a Foucauldian perspective he illustrates how:

[...] the content of 'citizenship' is not only variable historically (through time) and culturally, but is also subject, in any one time/jurisdiction, to disjoint logics (or 'rationalities') of government.

He shows that the 'progressive liberalism' which, in the 1960s, sought to improve the conditions of Aboriginal peoples by arguing for an end to legal inequalities between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians. 'constitutes a new conservatism' which opposes Aboriginal attempts to control availability of alcohol and reduce its harm on the same grounds (Rowse 1993, p.394).

Counter to this, political progressives have proposed an alternative construction of rights based on notions of the rights of cultural groups. This would allow Aboriginal community groups to control the availability of alcohol, on the grounds that non-Aboriginal drinking patterns are:

[...] neither culturally suitable nor sufficiently accessible to be put into practice by most Central Australian Aborigines' (cited in Rowse 1993, p.395).

The Race Discrimination Commissioner has taken the matter of the collective rights of groups further in the *Alcohol Report* (1995) and recommends changes to the Racial Discrimination Act (1975) to ensure that collective rights in areas such as alcohol distribution have legal status (page 154). This would enable community interest to be defined more narrowly in terms of the health and social consequences for people living in specific areas. However, such a definition is problematic. This approach challenges a widely asserted view of the autonomy of the individual in Aboriginal communities (based on both traditional values of being one's own 'boss' and the historical link between citizenship and the right to drink), and the consequent difficulties in controlling drunken behaviour (Brady 1990).

This ideological conflict is reflected also in the non-Aboriginal community. As Lyon (1990) notes, in the Northern Territory there has been a fluctuation between an economically 'wet' approach supporting increases in government control over the availability of alcohol and, to a lesser extent, spending on programs; and a 'dry' approach, favouring individual

responsibility, free enterprise and small government. In Lyon's (1990) view, the extent of alcohol-related problems in the Territory warranted the former approach. It is a view shared by many Aboriginal people. In the words of Iamampa:

'The Liquor Commission is not interested in us and is not listening to us [...] We have been talking for too many years and too many people are dying, and still nobody wants to make the hard decisions to help our people' (in Lyon 1991, p.13).

At the same time as these philosophical and political debates are occurring, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal groups have been pragmatically attempting to limit the sale and consumption of alcohol by legislative means. d'Abbs (1990) has identified three approaches aimed at restricting the consumption of alcohol within certain areas.

- The community control model, embodied in Western Australia's *Aboriginal Communities Act 1979*, enables some Aboriginal communities to establish their own by-laws to regulate alcohol consumption (among other things), but provides little support for enforcement of those by-laws.
- The statutory control model, is exemplified by provisions of the South Australian *Liquor Licensing Act 1985* which enable local councils to apply to have certain areas declared 'dry' and by provisions of the *Northern Territory Summary Offences Act* (the 'Two Kilometre Law') which make it an offence to consume alcohol in a public place within two kilometres of a licensed premise.
- The complementary control model, combines both community and statutory control. It is exemplified by provisions of the Northern Territory *Liquor Act 1979*) which enable Aboriginal communities to apply to for various restrictions on availability and provide for enforcement of those provisions.

Important philosophical differences underlie these models. While the community and complementary control models aim to give varying degrees of control to Aboriginal people, most commentators see the 'Two Kilometre Law' as a transparent attempt to clear the streets of Aboriginal drinkers while doing nothing to address the underlying problems. Designated alcohol-free zones in NSW have apparently served a similar purpose (Mark & Hennessy 1991).

In reviewing the success of these models of control, d'Abbs (1990) stresses the need to separate concerns about public drunkenness from those

of prevention of alcohol abuse. Policies to deter public drunkenness should not impede individuals or groups from acting against alcohol related harm. He claims that restricted area policies will be successful only if they promote the capacity of Aboriginal individuals and groups to control the use of alcohol, and that they require support to enforce restrictions, given the vested interests in the sale and promotion of alcohol and widespread desire for drinking. For these reasons, d'Abbs (1990, p.132) supports the complementary control model, particularly the restricted area provisions of the *Northern Territory Liquor Act*.

There are a number of studies describing attempts at restricting alcohol consumption under these legislative arrangements (d'Abbs 1990; Larkins & McDonald 1984; Mark & Hennessy 1991; Langton 1992; Lyon 1990, 1991). The general consensus appears to be that they have been a qualified success. Reviewing Northern Territory initiatives in the early 1980s Larkins and McDonald (1984) cite the improved standards of licensed premises, easier public access to the licensing and review process, restricted areas designation, and restrictions on trading hours for take-away sales as well received by indigenous people and health and welfare agencies, if not the liquor industry.

Attempts to restrict the availability of alcohol under various liquor licensing acts have been pushed even further by community groups. In November 1992, as a result of petitioning by the Halls Creek Alcohol Action Advisory Committee in Western Australia, the Director of Liquor Licensing placed restrictions on the sale of packaged alcohol in the town. Under the new regulations, the sale of packaged alcohol is prohibited prior to midday on any day, and flask and cask wine may only be sold between 4 pm and 6 pm with a limit of one cask or flagon per person (Holmes 1994).

A 13 week trial of 'grog free days' which will prohibit trading in hotel front bars and bottle shops on Thursdays in Tennant Creek has also been announced recently. It is the first time bans have been imposed on non-Aboriginal as well as Aboriginal people in an Australian town with a majority of non-Aboriginal residents, (3000 total population with about 35% Aborigines) and they result from an appeal to the Northern Territory Liquor Commission by women from the local Julalikari Association. The bans have been opposed by alcohol retailers in the town, one of whom estimated that the ban had cost her \$5 000, or half her week's earnings in the first week of operation. Local Aboriginal women, however, had no reservations:

We are pretty happy with it and the old people too. It's the first time they have had decent sleep (Valda Shannon, of the Julalikari Association, *The West Australian* 19 August 1995, p.38).

Aboriginal attempts to restrict alcohol sale and consumption demonstrate an understanding of the link between availability and excessive consumption and the need

'[...] to remove alcohol from an everyday item and return it to its position as a special substance, a drug which must be treated with caution' (Langton 1992, p.23).

Implications for Prevention

What then are the practical implications of a political economy approach to alcohol in Aboriginal Australia? We are not suggesting that current attempts to limit the demand for alcohol at an individual and community level should be de-emphasised. Individual and group acknowledgement of alcohol-related harm and willingness to accept responsibility for it are crucial. The development of a wide range of Aboriginal controlled treatment programs throughout Australia reveals an acknowledgement of that responsibility. But this is not enough to turn the tide of more than two hundred years of complex relationships regarding alcohol.

A focus on the question of supply and promotion provides immediate limits to the availability of alcohol and it is something pragmatic that Aboriginal groups can achieve. Throughout Australia Aboriginal groups have shown their willingness to control the supply of alcohol in order to minimise its harmful effects (Brady 1990; Langton 1991; Gray *et al.* 1995) and to take action to limit its promotion (Boffa *et al.* 1994). What they need are more clearly defined targets for their energetic responses.

The focus on supply also spreads the responsibility for alcohol related harm more equitably within the Australian community. Aboriginal people and health and welfare advocates are insisting that the state and its agencies such as Liquor Licensing Commissions accept the responsibilities they have with respect to the supply and promotion of alcohol to Aboriginal people. Measures such as the increase of licensing fees for full-strength alcohol and corresponding reductions for low strength drinks, decriminalisation of public drunkenness, the provision of minimum standards for amenities on licensed premises, stronger laws to facilitate prosecution of licensees serving juveniles and intoxicated persons, and those transporting liquor onto 'dry' communities, simplification and development of more appropriate complaint

procedures, appointment of local inspectors to ensure that licensed premises comply with the law, and to negotiate local resolution of disputes, have all been suggested by Aboriginal community organisations such as the Aboriginal Justice Council in Western Australia (Gray *et al.* 1994, p.16).

Much of the effort to control the availability of alcohol in Aboriginal communities has focused on the need to reduce the demand for the substance. This necessarily means that attention is directed to Aboriginal drinkers, rather than the alcohol producers and promoters who aggressively seek to increase their market share when health authorities the world over are arguing for moderation, and agencies of the State which have the legislative authority to limit market expansion but which, for ideological reasons, may prefer the excesses of the free market. These are the kind of relationships a political economy of alcohol in Aboriginal Australia needs to explore.

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Notes

- ¹ A complicating factor here is the increasing purchase of liquor outlets by Aboriginal groups who may then contribute to excessive consumption by providing easy access to alcohol in order to increase profits which come to the community. This issue requires detailed analysis of the ways in which Aboriginal communities are linked to the broader structures of alcohol supply and promotion, both at the macro and micro levels.

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