



Lockout Laws

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I have worked in the hospitality industry, including in the Sydney CBD, for seven years, and have lived and worked in Sydney or the suburbs for ten. As someone who works in the industry, and is often travelling around the CBD late at night after work, or stopping somewhere for a drink on the way home, I feel I am in a decent position to offer a relevant perspective on the impact of the lockout laws.

I feel I should mention from the start that I do not agree with the current lockout laws. I believe they were a knee-jerk response to a problem facing our community, a rush job implemented in an atmosphere of media outrage and dreamt up without the consultation of affected business and community groups. I also believe they have done little to curb the problem of street violence, which I think is borne out in statistics which highlight the problem has simply been displaced to areas beyond the CBD. Shutting down the CBD overnight to prevent street violence is akin to banning driving between 1:30am and 5am to prevent car crashes. The road toll may dip, but the concept is frankly ridiculous, and would restrict people's social lives, and of course impact business, and we have seen both of these consequences play out over the course of the lockout laws enforcement. I also feel the 10pm state wide take away alcohol ban is almost a non-sequitur in the context of which these laws were introduced - because of violence in the Sydney CBD, someone in Broken Hill can't buy a six pack at 10:05pm? I personally believe shutting people out is not an answer, that we need a multi-pronged approach, we need to educate, to try and deal with our cultural obsession with machismo-through-violence, we need more public transport options to get people home before they get involved in violence, and perhaps have more police patrols in problem areas late at night.

There is also a cynical part of me, and I assure you I am not alone, which suspects that along with being an attempt to protect people from random violence, the lockout laws were a convenient way to shutter loud, boisterous, late-night drinking establishments and pave the way for more clean-cut, gentrified businesses to take their place, or open up more of Sydney to property development. It also leaves a bitter taste in the mouth that the planned casino at Barangaroo miraculously lies outside the lockout zone. Of course, such suspicions imply property development and gambling industries hold great sway amongst our state politicians, quite a fanciful notion(!) This surely presents some kind of public relations problem for the NSW government and breeds mistrust within the electorate. But I digress.

I work in a drinking establishment inside the lockout zone, more specifically a bar, which closes around 1am. You may presume that due to those opening hours, business has not suffered because of the lockout. However, we have a relatively busy bottleshop, which also used to trade right up to 1am. That is up to 3 hours of trade, per night, for two years - lost because of the lockout laws. To this day we are turning people away after ten on a regular basis, and that is just at our relatively small venue. This is real money being lost when you consider people spend an average of \$40+ per transaction at our bottleshop.

Finishing work around 2am, myself and my coworkers have obviously been affected by the laws. Now, after our 8, 10, or 12+ hour shifts, we can no longer stop for a few drinks after work to wind down, unless we are willing to travel out of our way. It seems unfair that our social lives should be negatively impacted like this, when the bankers, lawyers, retail workers et al that also work in the CBD, but just happen to have chosen careers that finish earlier, can go socialise to their heart's content after a hard day. Not to mention the loss in revenue to businesses and the government due to our inability to get into a licensed venue - that is five,

ten, or fifteen eager customers not buying drinks, not buying cigarettes, not playing poker machines, not purchasing late-night food - and again, this is just our one small group, there are many more people out there going through the same thing. Everywhere, social lives are being affected and potential business is being lost.

Speaking of business being lost, having worked late at night in the CBD for over half a decade, I have seen nothing else have such a negative impact on businesses as the lockout laws. Over the last two years I have seen, first hand, late night venues I often frequent haemorrhaging customers. Many have closed, or had to renovate and completely change their business model. Venues that targeted the late night hospitality trade - people like myself and my co-workers, finishing work in the early hours of the morning and looking to wind down - have simply ceased to exist, as that customer base has vanished. The closures of many King's Cross and Oxford St business is well documented, with many owners citing the lockout laws as the reason their businesses failed. Even establishments outside the lockout zone have been affected, with many having their hand forced and implementing house policies refusing entry after certain times, as they were suffering the effects of already-intoxicated patrons, finding themselves locked out of the CBD, spilling out into surrounding suburbs such as Newtown and Pyrmont. As a bartender I am often asked by customers what options are available in Sydney in terms of late-night entertainment, and these days I have very few answers. International and even interstate visitors are frequently bemused when I tell them their only options are their hotel room or a cab to the casino. I feel like it is only a matter of time before Sydney's dearth of nightlife affects tourism - I already see through word of mouth and social media that we have become a less desirable destination internationally and a laughing stock amongst the other states of Australia. There is a significant demographic that wants to do more in Sydney than climb the harbour bridge or take photos in front of the opera house, and we aren't offering them that any more.

So, I can't go for a drink after work - I decide to go straight home. However, travelling home from the CBD has also been damaged by the lockout. Despite a policy being put into effect that essentially forces a large portion of people to leave the city in the first few hours after midnight, there has been zero noticeable improvement in late night public transport. There are still no trains for a significant portion of the night, still no late night ferries, the Night Ride buses are more crowded than ever as people, who prior to the lockout laws would have stayed out longer, now head home early, all at once. It is madness that a set of laws that by design encouraged people to leave the CBD early was not accompanied by more and better public transport options.

These are not just my experiences and opinions, but the experiences and opinions of many thousands of people who have been affected negatively by these laws. I am lucky enough that the business I work for has not had to close, or that trade has not slowed down enough that we had to lay off workers. Others have not been as fortunate. Businesses have been shut down and jobs have been lost.

The success of the lockout laws at curbing violence can be debated, although I believe they have failed even at that. What cannot be disputed is that they have had an apocalyptic effect on Sydney's nightlife. The post-1:30am Sydney that I and many others experienced, enjoyed, and poured money into for years is all but gone. The CBD and its drinking establishments have become ghost towns compared to what they were just a couple of years ago. The end product of two years of the lockout laws brings to mind the words of Tacitus - "they make a desert, and call it peace".

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