

Short-termism and a bandaid solution

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HI!

As a Sydney resident of 10 years, I've watched the great city grow and change. As a young resident, I've grown and changed with it. For myself, and all of the city's residents and visitors, the city landscape is one composed of memories and associations. Sure, there's an opera house, a harbour, and the beaches, but these don't exist in a void. They exist in context. We relate to them, and all other places, through the experiences they have housed, facilitated, and paved the way for. Larger, more public, more 'mainstream' places facilitate more predictable experiences. Great ones, without doubt, but the possibilities are limited and our interactions more homogenous.

I came here to study, then I worked hospitality for years, now I work in a consultancy in the city. My patterns of behaviour and interests have changed dramatically over the last decade. I don't often go out late anymore, and I rarely went to Kings Cross, but it's hard to see the loss of both those options cannot be seen as anything but a impingement on our freedom of movement and choice, and a limitation of the ways, times, and places in which we can interact with one another. In a modern, liberal, and democratic society, this does not seem acceptable. It also does not address the underlying issues. Thousands of people go out, but very few get violent. Some people get violent, without or without alcohol. The violence we've seen on our streets was the product a complex set of social and emotional forces, it was not simply a product of alcohol.

We all want a safe nightlife. That can't be questioned - it's simple. But we also want a diverse, engaging, and lively nightlife. Cities accommodate our differences, that's what makes them such wonderful places, especially for minority groups, subcultures, and those exploring their identity. This is also what makes cities creative and interesting places. Small bars, venues, and restaurants enable diverse and spontaneous creation and consumption. They contribute a huge amount to our economy and employ thousands. They are integral threads of the fabric of our community. They may not be the most attractive, but they make us great. And right now they are all suffering. Despite the NSW government attempts to spin the numbers in their studies (by changing areas assessed etc.), it's clear that the Sydney city's nighttime economy is being irrevocably transformed. The limitations of choice that our 'lockout' laws have affected are limiting creative exchange, spontaneous meetings, and challenging, character-building interactions. They are stifling the cultural growth of this city.

There undoubtedly has to be some response to alcohol-related violence in Sydney, but how about a considered, measured, mature and sustainable one? In light of the exclusion of some of the city's most violent (and most profitable, thanks to gambling revenue) bars and venues, it is difficult to see these laws even as moralising. They appear to be, sure, but selectively so. The short-term revenues associated with the casino and pokie-laden bars appear to blind our state government to the huge cost these establishments have on our society in the long-term (e.g. over 500 gambling related suicides a year). These revenues also clearly buy exemptions. It's a hard position for the state government to justify, but that isn't stopping them from trying.

These laws are a short-term, myopic, bandaid 'solution'. Were they a reasonable response given the scale of the problem? How many women die every week from domestic violence, and how is the state government responding? Have the laws stamped out violence? Or simply dispersed the problems? How safe are areas like Newtown now?

I don't know the answers to these questions, but I do know that one of the city's cultural hubs is unrecognisable, even unsafe now for LGBTI people and other subcultures, and that the police in the area dealing with a huge increase in violence.

We can come up with solutions. I don't doubt that. But we need to ask the right questions. What is the problem we're trying to solve?

Good luck with the review. I trust it will be insightful and impartial.

Best,
Will Scott-Kemmis