

Transcript

Speaker: Danny Blair, CEO of the Valley Liquor Accord

Venue: Politics In The Pub: intoxicating times, alcohol in the inner city

Date: 11 February 2010

NEW FARM NEIGHBOURHOOD CENTRE

Good evening.

Thank you for the opportunity to address everyone on **Intoxicating Times: alcohol and the inner city**

I trust you were not required to have your ID scanned to get in?

NO?

Good.

And you will be glad to know that this forum will finish before 3am, so there's no need to worry about being locked out.

But I will talk more about ID scanners and safety later on in my speech.

Drinking and having a good time is part of our social structure of our society in Australia. Not just the Fortitude Valley or New Farm areas which we are going to talk about tonight.

The issue of alcohol fueled violence is an Australian wide issue that every state and territory is facing at the moment.

Queensland and the Fortitude Valley are no different:

- Undergoing major liquor reform with the Liquor Act changing dramatically at the start of 2009.
- New changes to the act regarding show cause notices for violent venues as well as glassing incidents.
- Not to mention the current parliamentary inquiry into Alcohol related Violence and closing times.

It has been an interesting year for all licensees in Queensland!!!

Now let's look at some facts about alcohol and how it is consumed in Queensland.

Binge drinking does not start on Friday or a Saturday night in the licensed premises as the media would like you to believe.

The culture of drinking starts on a Wednesday & Thursday when you pick up the paper and see 3 or 4 full page retail ads advertising "2 for 1 deals", "30% off when you buy 6 bottles", bundle packages and "we will beat any price" offers from our large retail chains.

82% of all alcohol consumed in Queensland is consumed off premises at private gatherings, house parties & just having a drink at home with dinner.

Obviously with this vast amount of alcohol being consumed off premises it makes you wonder why tougher laws are not being applied to stop the discounting and advertising from these retail outlets.

Licensed premises are bound by strict rules and regulation that prohibit us from advertising or selling drinks at discounted prices and doing 2 for 1 drinks. I agree with this policy from OLGR but why are these same rules not being applied to the retail outlets.

A recent study completed by VLA showed that over 80% of people who are attending Fortitude Valley licensed venues consume 6 or more drinks prior to coming in with some having in excess of 10 drinks before heading out. These people are on the verge of being unduly intoxicated before stepping a foot in a licensed premise.

A lot more needs to be done to stop the binge drinking culture in Australia and I believe it starts with having tougher regulations for all retail outlets from being able to serve cheap alcohol.

Now back to the Fortitude Valley. If you're in the Valley Entertainment Precinct on any given weekend the scenario of being locked-out or being asked to pop your driver's license into an ID scanner is very real.

What you will start noticing in 2010 is the prevalence of more ID scanners in Valley venues.

The installation of ID scanners has drawn plenty of criticism from civil libertarians and lawyers regarding privacy laws. They question whether hotels should be allowed to use them, or if they do, are patrons compelled to hand over their license to gain entry.

It's even reached the point of scaremongering about security guards gaining information on patrons and then stalking them.

But in reality the only people who have access to the information are managers, and remember managers, like security guards, are subject to regular Police background checks.

The ID scanner data is only held for three months and then deleted.

Personally, I'd be more concerned about the details in the hands of your local gym than a licensed premise.

Of course, the prime purpose of ID scanners is to make people accountable for their actions. Which seems to be the one key ingredient missing in all the hype about alcohol-related violence and ways to address the issue and drinking culture in Australia.

That's not to play down the seriousness of violence but we have to start making the person who commits the act more responsible for their actions and duly punished.

The Government invested a lot of Police resources during Operation Unite and handed out public nuisance tickets like how to vote cards on election day. The Valley Liquor Accord has no problem with that. In fact we'd welcome Police in large numbers every weekend.

People sober up pretty quickly when they see a blue uniform and they certainly think twice in any situation, whether it's on the road, at a major sporting event or a music festival, about doing something stupid if there is a strong Police presence.

If the Queensland government had to abide by the same ratios for Police to patrons as licensed venues have to for crowd controllers they would be required to have 100 Police on duty every Friday and Saturday night in the Fortitude Valley area. Instead we are left with about 10-12 Police patrolling the streets on a busy night.

The Queensland Police, particularly the Fortitude Valley Police, do a fantastic job but are being overrun by the sheer weight of numbers that they encounter every week.

It is ironic that we have the equivalent of Schoolies numbers every weekend in the Fortitude Valley, yet there are 90 Police allocated to look after Schoolies but only 12 for the Fortitude Valley. Something is dramatically wrong with our current system. More resources and money need to be spent on ensuring the Fortitude Valley is a safer place for everyone to enjoy.

You also have to remember that it was this Government who passed legislation making the Fortitude Valley the first entertainment precinct in Australia.

A lot of businesses have invested heavily in the Fortitude valley area over the past 4 years creating some of the best licensed venues in Australia:

- Buffalo Club – Best restaurant in Queensland – restaurant and caterers association
- Bowery - Best cocktail bar in Australia – Gourmet Traveler
- Cloudland – best new bar in Australia – Bar Show awards

We are at risks of seeing great venues like these becoming a thing of the past in the valley

The Queensland government has let the whole of the Valley Entertainment Precinct down by not supporting the growth of the area with sufficient resources to allow it to flourish in the way the government intended when they passed legislation to create the entertainment precinct in 2006.

Given this you may ask what licensees have contributed to help with the growth of Valley Entertainment precinct and the issue of Alcohol related violence.

On Jan 1st 2009 all licensed premises were charged a licensing fee for the first time to help harm minimization. For a venue trading to 5am in the morning the fee is \$21,000 per year, every year. The fee is lower for venues with shorter trading hours.

A total of \$1.15 million dollars was paid in licensing fees in 2009 in Fortitude Valley area to help harm minimization. We have not seen any of this money reinvested back into the area to provide a safer environment for our patrons. The licensees of the Valley Liquor Accord care about our patrons and the environment we create for them to socialize.

The Judicial System

A man recently appeared at Roma St Magistrates Court on a public nuisance charge emanating from Operation Unite – it was his fourth time he had fronted court on a public nuisance charge in 12 months.

The serial pest was fined about \$300 - the equivalent of two Big Day Out tickets - which just shows the Government takes a feather duster to people who misbehave and yet wields a stick at licensees.

That fine was not a deterrent, nor was the three previous fines by the looks of it.

However, when that serial pest attempts to enter a venue with an ID scanner, he will discover he is no longer welcome at that venue. He will learn the meaning of accountability and he will realize he is not welcome in the Valley Entertainment Precinct.

The VLA believes this will have a far greater impact on reducing the number of alcohol-related incidents in the precinct than some of the punishments handed out in court.

It may seem a heavy handed measure to start refusing entry to people for public nuisance charges, but making people accountable for their actions has to start somewhere.

The judicial system needs to be held accountable for their inaction against people who are repeat offenders committing acts of anti social behaviour.

This Queensland Government needs to follow the proactive steps taken by the South Australia government and bring in a law which bars repeat offenders from entering entertainment precincts and licensed venues.

So far 900 people have been banned from entering the entertainment precincts in some cases and in other cases individual licensed venues.

Licensees have paid a heavy financial price through fines, licensing fees and even changing glassware to accommodate the stance against alcohol-related incidents, but little is being done to seriously target the perpetrators - especially when a serial offender is only fined two big day out tickets.

Some may say, it's the licensees who fill people full of liquor and not want to take responsibility for the actions of an intoxicated person. This is just not the case the appropriate legislation is in place to ensure that all licensees and staff act in the correct & professional manner.

There is always going to be 1 or 2 licensees who do the wrong thing and I hope that these licensees get punished to the full extent of the law; but do not tar us all with the same brush based on 1 or 2 licensees who do the wrong thing.