

## A new “Rum Rebellion”: Concerted effort required to defeat the new Rum Corps

2010 was the bicentenary of Governor Macquarie’s arrival in NSW and his dealings with the infamous Rum Corps. He refused to join them and ensured their disbandment. Power had become entrenched within the officers of the military garrison. They had a monopoly on the procurement of alcohol and in the “Rum rebellion” overthrew the previous Governor Captain William Bligh who it is understood, attempted to impose some order and support for a broader constituency base.

201 years later and little has changed in this former penal colony as a metamorphosed liquor industry<sup>1</sup> exerts its dominance and pervasive influence over the critical political decision making process.

More and more outstanding research on the costs and consequences of the irresponsible supply chain of the promotion, sale, service, supply and consumption of alcohol, particularly amongst our vulnerable and impressionable younger generation and indigenous population, only reinforces what we already know. Alcohol has become the currency of “having a good time”. Drunk is good. Drinking celebrates sporting success. Drinking is patriotic. Alternatively, alcohol harm reduction advocates diametrically frame their “solutions” around effective cost saving availability/supply related measures given the extent to which the industry and regulators have so successfully culturally inoculated their younger target audience against moderate drinking.

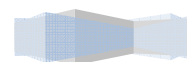
Research shows that per capita consumption of alcohol was at an all time high in Australia. Even more disturbing, 80% of alcohol consumed among 14 - 24 yr olds was done dangerously. This is great news for and illuminates the success of the new Rum Corps whilst highlighting the weakness of solely relying upon the orthodox “evidenced based approach to challenge harmful drinking”. The new Corps ain’t interested in the “evidence”. It’s not their fault.

Yet despite all this research evidence, from our frontline community perspective, we have had less success than Macquarie’s temporary amelioration of the influence of the grog industry. We have failed to prevent or substantially reduce the well documented cost, misery and harm<sup>2</sup> arising from industry’s profit/shareholder value maximising activities inexorably linked to

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<sup>1</sup> Like the original Rum Corps, the power of the industry is concentrated in a small number of hands including the increasing share of large supermarket chains. The overwhelming majority of reported assaults occur in only a very small proportion of licensed premises –mainly those trading after midnight.

<sup>2</sup> Laslett, A-M., Catalano, P., Chikritzhs, Y., Dale, C., Doran, C., Ferris, J., Jainullabudeen, T., Livingston, M, Matthews, S., Mugavin, J., Room, R., Schlotterlein, M. and Wilkinson, C. (2010), *The Range and Magnitude of Alcohol’s Harm to Others*. Fitzroy, Victoria: AER Centre for Alcohol Policy Research, Turning Point Alcohol and Drug Centre, Eastern Health [http://www.aerf.com.au/Harm\\_to\\_Others\\_Full\\_Report\\_with-errata.pdf](http://www.aerf.com.au/Harm_to_Others_Full_Report_with-errata.pdf)



the volumes and strength of alcohol sold within a supportive regulatory environment.

How can this be when we have assembled so much conclusive independent scientific evidence, when we have an alphabet of alcohol research institutions, foundations, councils, professional medical colleges and associations representing emergency workers etc all with an objective and interest to reduce/prevent alcohol harm; and a bevy of eminent individuals with a distinguished track record of public achievement?

All governments in Australia and New Zealand display a strong aversion to adopting proven cost saving harm prevention measures including advertising and promotion controls, price increases, reducing the strength of alcohol after certain times, controlling the concentration of problematic licensed premises and modest reductions in late closing times. Our Newcastle community coalition campaigned strongly for this last measure in 2007. This intervention since its imposition by a (former) independent quasi judicial Authority in March 2008, has resulted in an internationally unprecedented 37% reduction<sup>3</sup> in reported alcohol related street assaults. This equates to preventing well over 1,000 younger persons being bashed on our inner city streets after midnight on weekend nights since the intervention.

Why are all other similarly disaffected local communities throughout NSW (and the rest of Australia/NZ) being wilfully deprived of similar spectacular cost saving harm reduction intervention? The new Rum Corps consisting in part of both the NSW Government and Opposition asserted that a 3am closure of pubs equates to the creation of a “wowsers” state<sup>4</sup>. Contrary to Australian Hotels Association (AHA) hysteria, there is no independent evidence that the small reduction in hotel late trading time has “devastated”<sup>5</sup> Newcastle.

The influence of the liquor industry, their subjugation of the political process and the countervailing fragmentation of the overly cautious alcohol harm prevention advocates is illustrated by the notable absence of the biggest combined social, health and law enforcement issue – alcohol related harm, from the March 2011 NSW Election agenda.

There is no well organised and effective opposition to the industry/political behemoth – the new Rum Corps. All the outstanding research and associated advocated measures including alcohol pricing, taxation, marketing, promotion, availability and supply will never gain traction with the Corps as they threaten their foundations and sources of primary income generation and legitimacy.

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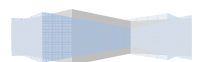
<sup>3</sup> Kypri, K., Jones, C., McElduff, P. and Barker, D. (2011), Effects of restricting pub closing times on night-time assaults in an Australian city. *Addiction*, 106: 303–310.

<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1360-0443.2010.03125.x/abstract>

<sup>4</sup> Sydney Morning Herald 30 March 2010 <http://news.smh.com.au/breaking-news-national/tough-new-limits-on-booze-sales-unions-20100330-r8o5.html> The Daily Telegraph 31 March 2010 <http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/news/nsw-act/kristina-keneally-wont-back-the-emergency-service-wowsers/story-e6freuzi-1225847680897>. See also ABC NSW Stateline 29 May 2009

<http://www.abc.net.au/stateline/nsw/content/2006/s2585182.htm>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2010/03/15/2845975.htm>



Hence the industry mantra of “individual responsibility”<sup>6</sup>, the cocoon of protective legislative and a PR environment of other elaborate decoys like pub created “Drinking Safety Institute”<sup>7</sup>, “busty booze bunnies” and blame deflection.

Prof. Doug Sellman has established a New Zealand group called *Alcohol Action* – “we need more than tinkering”. Australia has its *National Alliance for Action on Alcohol*<sup>8</sup> announced in March 2010 but struggling NSW community groups are unaware of its existence and it lost a golden opportunity to challenge the political parties’ failure to commit to alcohol harm prevention through the NSW State Election 2011.

Individual researchers<sup>9</sup> have highlighted the resemblance between the tactics of *Big Tobacco* and *Big Alcohol*. Others explore the impact of alcohol marketing on younger people and sportspeople. What appears to be missing however, is the public and collectively challenge and questioning of the big issues of power, persuasion, legitimacy and the all pervasive influence of the new Corps and its regulatory capture.

It is only after we have collectively and decisively examined, exposed and publicly challenged this impermeable barrier (the root of power and perpetuation of the Corps) that so effectively repels sensible and achievable reform, that we can achieve a meaningful and sustainable improvement in alcohol related harm in Australian communities. It’s no so much the parcel of proposed measures, but how they are packaged and delivered to crash through or crash down this barrier through the might of popular public opinion mesmerised into the uncritical acceptance of the “individual responsibility” industry mantra.

To counteract the power of the political/industrial symbiotic relationship, unfortunately our remaining resort appears to embarrass and shame our governments to put public, patron and police safety ahead of pub profits and political patronage. This form of leverage sits uncomfortable with many traditional bodies. We must continue to loudly expose and protest the full extent of the unconscionable shifting of the negative externalities of the industry onto the public sector including the needless diversion of overstretched public law enforcement and health service resources to pick up the pieces of the profiting from the oversupply and irresponsible marketing and service of alcohol.

This will also require a new popular rebellion – the adoption of a paradigm shift- transformational change amongst the existing alcohol harm reduction bodies that have already established a bulwark of solid credible research and

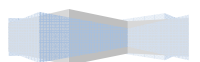
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<sup>6</sup> “Individual responsibility” is a key mantra to the NSW Government’s Hassle Free Nights program as associated AHA support <http://www.nsw.gov.au/hassle-free-nights>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.drinkingsafetyinstitute.com.au/>

<sup>8</sup> <http://alcoholpolicycoalition.org.au/http://alcoholpolicycoalition.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2010/03/NAAA-Media-Release-final-14-3-10.pdf>

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immediately available cost effective solutions. It also requires leadership and collaboration to provide tangible, relevant support and assistance to impoverished frontline urban as well as indigenous communities struggling against the excesses of the industry and complex individual State legal apparatus weighed in favour of the industry.

Macquarie left a number of public landmarks in the colony. Two hundred years on, united and empowered, we can finally achieve perhaps no greater legacy than alcohol harm minimisation and prevention for our current younger and future generations.

Tony Brown

Leads a coalition of Newcastle inner city resident groups, small businesses and concerned citizens (leave the rest up to you)

