

This is not about grog. It's about depression, hopelessness and failed government

Australia is a country that even when not being intolerably racist believes First Nations people are not able to look after ourselves

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The banning of grog in a community should be part of self-determination, not part of a wholesale removal of rights that white people take for granted.

I started writing this essay as I was drinking red wine from a stainless steel goblet at a picnic table in a rest area not far south of Alice Springs, on my way to the 33rd instalment of the legendary annual Barunga festival.

It was essential that I finish my wine before I travelled much further as Barunga, in the Northern Territory, is a dry community. Drinking there is outlawed, possession of alcohol is prohibited but not as a response to community requests or desires. Rather it was instituted as part of the Northern Territory intervention that started with an act of parliament and an invasion of Indigenous communities by the Australian Defence Force more than 10 years ago and has never actually ended – despite several changes in federal government.

If anyone is caught taking grog into a restricted community, all of which are Indigenous communities in the NT, the police can confiscate their vehicle. I have been warned, threatened, firsthand by NT police.

On my way to Kalkarindji, NT, for the festival celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Wavehill Walkoff in 2016, I was pulled over by about 20 police officers in something like 10 Landcruiser Troop carriers who were checking every car for alcohol. I have never lived in a dictatorship but after that experience I can imagine what it would feel like.

This was on the way to a celebration of one of the landmark moments in the birth of Indigenous land rights. Kalkarindji, where the Whitlam government gave freehold title to the traditional owners in 1975 and where, I was told, under the intervention the federal government stole their land again by forcing the traditional owners to lease their land to the commonwealth.

Ironically, when you consider the campaigns against drink driving, in the Kimberley town of Derby in Western Australia it's impossible to buy alcohol unless you can present car keys to the liquor store staff. I don't know whose idea that was but it's spectacularly stupid. It could only have been instituted to stop the homeless Indigenous people, who live under trees in the town, from drinking. It's still stupid, being only able to buy drink if you are planning to drive away.

If you are banned from drinking at home (or your friend's homes) and cannot afford to drink at the pub what would you do? Yes, I would drink in the park too.

What people never consider, what if the reason there are so many Indigenous people drinking in parks and under trees is that they are denied the simple pleasure of drinking at home? If they are lucky enough to have a home at all. Many drinkers have left their communities to have access to alcohol, they have left their families, even children, they have moved away from where they can practice culture. Others drink in town and drive home to community, or drink in their cars on the way home.

At Barunga a big screen showed videos, advertising campaigns and community projects from a number of Indigenous communities against drink driving. I have heard firsthand from community workers that the cause of a recent increase in drink driving is the grog bans. If you want to drink and are from an Aboriginal community from the NT you have only limited choices: you could move to a park or under a tree in the nearest town, drink there and be away from community. You could drink at the pub in the nearest town then drive home drunk or you can buy a carton of beer and drink it in the car as you drive back to your community.

I have heard of white workers in Indigenous communities flouting the law and getting away with it. I have been told by white people how to get away with it.

Also in Barunga, members of the community have asked for permission to open a social club where alcohol is served and the community and the elders can police it. They are sick of people being run over at night when walking the 30km to the community from the “drinker’s camp” – the first stop on the road outside the restricted zone – at night.

When I visited Borroloola I was told that the only alcohol was half-strength beer and there was an 18-can limit; too bad if I wanted anything full-strength or gluten free. The nearest other grog was at Cape Crawford, more than 100km away. If Aboriginal people make that 200km round trip they cannot even take their drinks home, they must drink them as they drive or drink on the riverbank (among the crocodiles) or the side of the road where they would probably be arrested for vagrancy.

At the liquor store in Katherine a police constable checks ID when you enter. They say they perform this duty, enforce this law, without prejudice. They say the laws are to stop problem drinkers. Everybody knows they exist to stop First Nations people from drinking. They have a “banned drinkers register”, but I am curious how many white people have made that list.

The police don’t check the banned drinkers register anyway, the shop assistant does that. It is necessary, when buying a drink in Alice Springs or Katherine to hand over ID twice, once to police and once to the shop assistant. The police must be there to intimidate blackfellas who have learned over generations to be terrified of the police.

How do I know that?

Last time I was in Katherine I saw white people hand over their ID to the police and have it handed back after no more than a cursory glance. When an Aboriginal woman walked in they held her up for long enough to check her ID details on a tablet, and possibly they were also recording those details for later. It's not hard to imagine that they were checking to see if she had any outstanding warrants, something they did not do with any of the white people.

It's not hard to imagine an Indigenous person being afraid to hand over their ID to a police constable; especially after our history. Even I am nervous about handing the police my ID.

In Darwin, where most of the white people of the NT live, the police don't check ID when buying grog. This is despite the fact that people in Katherine, justifying the police checking my ID, said it was the same across the entire NT.

This essay is not about grog, not about drink, not about grog bans. There are many places in Australia where grog has been banned through the decision of the traditional owners, I accept that. This is about a government, about successive governments, who believe they have the right to control Indigenous affairs. This is about white supremacy and a country that does not believe First Nations people deserve, have not the maturity, to manage our own affairs.

The issue is summarised by the simple phrase "about us without us".

What most people do not consider is: what if the problem was never access to grog, what if the problem is despair and depression? The sort of despair and depression that leads young people to suicide, to petrol sniffing, to underage drinking. The sort of despair and depression that leads someone to choose death over the living world. In Darwin I once saved a man's life. I called him an ambulance when the security guard in the shopping centre, where he was asking for help, refused, deciding instead to remove him. Needless to say the sick man was Aboriginal.

That was not the sad thing though. The sad thing was that he kept saying, again and again, that what he really wanted was to see his parents, go to his old-people. That was why, he said, he kept 'forgetting' to take his medication. Deep down, I don't think he wanted to live.

This is not about grog bans. The banning of grog in a community should always be a decision of the community, not something imposed from outside. Such a thing should be part of self-determination, not part of a wholesale removal of rights that white people take for granted.

Remember, grog bans don't just hurt the problem drinkers, they also punish sensible drinkers who live in Indigenous communities. Imagine Christmas if the government had banned alcohol in your suburb. Imagine not even being able to cook with wine, ever.

Remember how well prohibition went in the USA. All it did was lead to organised crime. Already white crime gangs smuggle grog into Aboriginal communities, even the government knows about that; that's why the penalties are so high. Nobody deprived of simple pleasures by outside forces takes it lightly and simply obeys. Nobody.

This is not about grog. This is also about suicide and hopelessness. There's an epidemic of suicide among the youth of Indigenous communities. It's hard if not impossible to be sure why young people are ending their lives in Indigenous communities, but I would argue that the laws treating our kids like they are second-class citizens and the government telling them their parents are not good enough are certainly not helping.

It is not genetics or an inherent moral failure that led to the epidemic of petrol sniffing among Indigenous youth in remote communities. It's depression and a desperate desire to not have to feel it. It must be, otherwise such an epidemic would infect Indigenous youth in urban areas, in the cities, in Melbourne, Sydney, Perth.

This is about paternalism, about a country that even when not being intolerably racist believes the First Nations people are not able to look after ourselves. That's if I am being generous and assuming the government has the best of intentions and is not just using paternalism as a way to control us.

This is about the intervention; not the after-effects so much, although they are unacceptable, but rather the thinking of a government, a bipartisan decision that stripped Indigenous people of our human rights on the basis of a lie. It is not particularly well known, even among Indigenous people, but the 'crisis' that the intervention was intended to solve was manufactured, artificial, fake. The intervention was essentially built on a scaffold of lies; lies that there were child-rape rings in the Northern Territory.

When experts investigated the child-rape gang allegations during the intervention they found nothing. Child rape happens but it happens everywhere in Australia, the perpetrators are not of one race or culture. The urge to rape children is a sickness, not a part of any culture. Yet the government is not attempting to intervene across the entire country.

They intervened in Indigenous communities but resisted doing anything to stop child rape in the Catholic church. It was always about race.

I have spoken to many people about the intervention, Indigenous and not; a common refrain is "it was terrible but at least they saved the children". Even now people believe the lies, the lies that a moment of research would reveal. I want to know why, even after all this time, the government has not apologised for the lies and why the mainstream media has not held them accountable.

It was defamation of an entire culture.

People still believe it.

You can't unring a bell.

If what is happening every day in the Northern Territory was occurring in another country nobody in Australia would stand for it. If there was a ban on booze entering any white community in any capital city in Australia, imposed on citizens by the

government, there would be riots. The only reason people accept what is happening in the NT is that it's happening to Indigenous people, far out of sight.

Australia is racist and happy for Indigenous people to suffer under a paternalistic, colonial iron fist.

Indigenous people are forced to accept conditions that no other Australian would tolerate. We are blamed for the effects of colonisation in an extraordinary case of victim blaming. We have had the basics card, grog bans and the intervention layered on top of deaths in custody, high rates of incarceration and lack of prospects.

If a paternalistic approach to Aboriginal affairs was ever going to work we, the Aboriginal people, would no longer suffer inequality.

Alcohol, petrol sniffing and suicide are huge killers of Indigenous Australians but it could be argued they are not the root problem themselves but are a side-effect of depression, of hopelessness.

What Indigenous communities need most right now is hope. People mistrust the system and the government so deeply they can see no hope for a future.

Back in 1988, at Barunga festival, the Barunga statement was delivered to the then prime minister, Bob Hawke, who agreed to its terms and promised treaty with First Nations Australians. This event, and the government's subsequent failure to act, led eventually to Treaty by Yothu Yindi in 1991; perhaps the best known song by an Indigenous Australian in the world.



NT signs historic Barunga agreement to begin Indigenous treaty talks

Dr M Yunupingu said in the song Treaty “I heard it on the radio, I saw it on the television” about the lies in 1988, when treaty was offered. That song was written because despite a promise by the prime minister no treaty has ever been negotiated between Indigenous Australians and the people who invaded our continent. In 1991 Bob Hawke, leaving the office of prime minister, hung the Barunga statement on the wall of parliament. It’s still there.

At Barunga in 2018, when the NT government offered a memorandum on treaty, Galarrwuy Yunupingu, who had fought for treaty all his life, said he did not know what treaty means anymore. I was there when treaty was promised again, when it went to radio, when even I reported it on social media. But it’s only possible to listen to lies for a limited time before trust becomes impossible. Indigenous people have little reason for hope after all these years of interminable lying. I have only one hope, I hope the politicians do not expect us to trust them. We have no reason to.

This essay is not about grog, not really. It’s about self-determination. Grog and alcohol abuse is a symptom, not a cause. The cause is trauma, intergenerational trauma, and the institutional abuse and racism that perpetuates it; trauma that the intervention has worsened. The intervention was never about healing Indigenous communities, or

if it was it was the most wrong-headed solution to the problem they could have imagined.

It was paternalistic, it was ill-managed, it was a failure and I have begun to believe nobody will ever be held to account. If grog is tearing communities apart so are grog bans. What else should I call it when someone leaves their community never to return, or dies through misadventure, because they cannot drink at home?