



Criminal Lawyers Association of the Northern Territory (CLANT)

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As a Northern Territory legal aid lawyer for almost fifteen years, my work is always interesting, and often exciting. But it can also be confronting, demoralising and distressing. I have represented hundreds of clients charged with assaulting their partner or other family members. I wish it were otherwise. As workers in the justice system, whether we be prosecutors or defence (or for that matter, judges and magistrates), we criminal lawyers are involved on a daily basis in sad and often horrible business. As a profession, we are committed to doing what we can to change this. I have been involved in the White Ribbon Day campaign now for several years as one of its Ambassadors. Each 25th November, men around Australia and indeed around the world swear never to commit, excuse or remain silent about violence against women. I also work hard alongside colleagues such as NT Australian of the Year Dr John Boffa to reduce the devastating harm caused by grog in our community. Here in the Territory, I have no doubt whatsoever that if we don't fix the grog problem, we won't fix the violence, and indeed, we won't fix anything much.

We've got a very long way to go, but it's encouraging that governments at both a national, State and Territory level have recognised the problem, and are at least talking the talk. For example, the National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children, endorsed recently by the Council of Australian Governments, has made the promotion of community involvement in making communities safe and free from violence as the very first of its 18 strategies. And within that strategy, it identifies the key actions of encouraging us all to speak out against violence, and to foster initiatives to reduce alcohol and drug abuse, including supporting local indigenous communities to take action against alcohol supply.

This week's announcements by Federal Minister Macklin of the Intervention's new alcohol measures are steps, but they're just small steps, when what we urgently need are big steps. Let's have a minimum price on grog so that nothing alcoholic is cheaper than the current price of beer. And let's have a tax based on how much actual alcohol is in the product, to wipe out the ridiculously unfair advantage cheap and nasty cask wine producers have over all their competitors. Do that, and we'll see an immediate, substantial and sustained reduction in grog-fuelled violence. Alternatively, we can just keep sending our young people off to gaol in ever-increasing numbers. However, we already have four and a half times the imprisonment rate of the rest of the country, and it's growing twice as fast as the rest of the country, so this is a path down which we, as a community, simply can not afford to go.

There's been a lot of debate this week by our politicians about the cost of our new prison. In sentencing an offender in the Supreme Court recently, Justice Mildren referred to the overcrowded conditions at Berrimah Prison, which he described as "an old institution, a very archaic and outdated system, not designed or constructed well for the Northern Territory's climate." Inmates on remand (who have, by the way, not been convicted of an offence) are locked in their cells 17 or 18 hours a day. They can languish there for months or even longer. His Honour noted that these conditions do not comply with Australia's international obligations, including the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners. So there's no doubt about it: we urgently need to improve prison conditions for existing inmates, and to plan for the future. And there's no doubt about this either: the new prison is going to cost us taxpayers a hell of a lot of money.

In contrast, the measures I've mentioned above which would bring down the consumption of alcohol, and in turn the violence which fills our prisons, would not cost hundreds of millions. These steps would not even cost hundreds of thousands. These steps would cost nothing. It's time to take some big steps to turn down the tap, and to tone down the violence. We simply can't afford not to.

Russell Goldflam

President, Criminal Lawyers Association of the Northern Territory

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