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Submission to House of Representatives Inquiry into Alcohol Use in Indigenous Communities

Since the main concern about alcohol use is its promotion of violence, the traditions of violence in indigenous communities need to be given a central place. I write to support the views of Bess Price and Stephanie Jarrett on that topic. Their combination of long experience and careful study makes their conclusions more credible than those reached by “experts” from afar.

I accept the findings of Stephanie Jarrett’s book *Liberating Aboriginal People from Violence* (Connor Court, 2013). Based on a wealth of detail, she shows that indigenous communities, especially remote ones, have ingrained traditions of unrestrained violence going back to pre-contact times. Alcohol aggravates but does not fundamentally cause those patterns of violence. Alcohol disinhibits both violence itself and the further consumption of alcohol (as in white society). But the results are worse in remote indigenous communities¹ because the traditions of restraint of violence which white societies have slowly built up over many centuries are not present.²

Similar ideas have been put forward by Bess Price (who wrote the preface to Jarrett’s book). She has attended many funerals of relatives killed in alcohol-related violence and car accidents and has experienced violence herself. She has urged that indigenous communities themselves must restrain their own violence and accept outside forceful help such as the Northern Territory Intervention. She has put forward the unpopular view that violent and alcoholic young indigenous people are better off

¹ Detailed in the endless reports in the ‘What’s new’ column of the Australian Database of Indigenous Violence, <http://indigenouviolence.org/>

in jail than out. Yet the 18% swing she gained to win the remote seat of Stuart in the 2012 NT election suggests she has strong support in remote communities.

It follows from Jarrett's and Price's findings that it is not helpful to think of the issue of violence and alcoholism in terms of colonialism, or self-determination, or education, or "social and economic determinants". Those politically-correct concepts avoid looking directly at the problem of violent traditions and how alcohol exacerbates the individual behaviours that are permitted by (often required by) those traditions.

Successful models for how to contain violence exist. We know how it happened with our own society, as described in Steven Pinker's *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*.³ Government gradually contained private violence through armies and police forces, and tolerance of violence lessened. In aboriginal society, the missionaries were successful in many places, creating oases of relative calm between the endemic violence of pre-contact times and the disasters of the post-Nugget Coombs era.⁴ Admittedly, the missionaries had the advantage of operating far from the temptations of white society, including alcohol, but their successes in creating relative peace show that progress is possible, sometimes on a short timescale.

The sort of policies suggested by this perspective include:

- A "surge" in the Intervention to make clear that violence is not tolerated, especially violence by "elders" who believe their position puts them above the law
- Implementation details on this and other "tough" policies to be decided with consultation in communities (not consultation with vocal elders but with women and vulnerable youth, in their own languages); and explained to communities by advocates of peace like Bess Price and Francis Xavier Kurrupuwu.
- Strict application of Australian law as regards underage "marriage"
- Extension to remote areas of compliance with "responsible service of alcohol" laws that have reduced alcoholic violence in big cities; backed up by CCTV in bars
- Reinstatement of the NT banned drinkers register, or equivalent

² My ARC-funded project on the virtue of temperance looked at traditions of restraint and self-discipline in the Australian context, including issues of indigenous violence, <http://web.maths.unsw.edu.au/~jim/restraintproj.html>

³ <http://www.amazon.com/The-Better-Angels-Our-Nature/dp/1455883115>

⁴ Examples in J. Franklin, [The cultural roots of Aboriginal violence](#), *Quadrant* 52 (11) (Nov, 2008), 22-25; J. Franklin, [The missionary with 150 wives](#), *Quadrant* 56 (7/8), (July/Aug 2012), 31-32.

- Restricted hours of service of alcohol, especially full strength alcohol
- Safe houses to which victims of violence in remote communities can escape
- Birthing centres to look after and support pregnant indigenous women for two years from conception – designed with cultural appropriateness, live-in for part of that time, physically safe, with education on FAS and smoking risks, on nutrition and health care of babies, and with advice against “cruelling” of infants
- Support for positive male role models for indigenous boys,⁵ e.g. in football camps by noted players and in boarding schools for boys from remote communities

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⁵ The importance of male role models explained in Steve Biddulph, *Raising Boys*.