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From: Chris Endrey
Sent: Thursday, 14 May 2015 12:26 PM
To: Committees
Subject: Inquiry Submission

To The Secretary,

I apologise that this submission comes after your public call, I had mistakenly sent it to a wrong address. Given the nearness in time, I hope that you have the capacity to receive it alongside all others and treat it accordingly.

I am writing in submission to the Inquiry into elements impacting on the future of the ACT Clubs sector.

I write hoping to illuminate the perspective of those communities and organisations who are either perilously marginalised or entirely untenable due to the extraordinary market imbalance brought about by the disproportionate power of the clubs and their absurd pokies revenue.

As a musician, I have performed all across our city - my home of over a decade. In that time, I have, with others, grown Fun Machine from a band playing to a few people in a cafe into a successful world of national radio play, international touring, major festivals and even a proudly-held MAMA (Music ACT Music Award) for Best ACT Artist of 2013.

As an event producer, I co-produced and hosted 'In Canberra Tonight,' a variety show held across a range of Canberra venues which explored and celebrated our own unique culture with interviews and performances from Andrew Denton, Karen Middleton, Dr Philip Nitschke, Ben Quilty, Kate Carnell, Katy Gallagher, First Dog On The Moon, Omar Musa, David Pope and some 190 brilliant others. This enterprise attracted successive sellout crowds of 200+ and was all a completely local operation - independent of government assistance.

Across these broad experiences, it has been nothing short of despairing to continuously encounter systemic obstacles which exist from the dominance the clubs of the ACT have over public space. The viability of my artistic practice has sadly been uncorrelated to its success.

There wasn't a single In Canberra Tonight that didn't require us to build either a stage, a lighting rig, a sound system, or most typically, all three. The simple absence of appropriate venues is a huge time and cost impediment to the professional development of our artists, who are otherwise continuously demonstrating to be of world quality. It is tragic and no coincidence that their practice is often best realised by moving elsewhere.

There are very few extant bars with stages outside of the clubs - who have no genuine incentive to run cultural events that provide less income than even a single machine. Indeed, those cultural events housed by most clubs are certainly secondary to their primary function of sustaining revenue. This is visible in the Dickson Tradies, who last decade entirely filled their hall area with machines.

The Committee will be familiar with the well-documented dearth of fit-for-purpose live music venues in the Territory. I can sadly attest to the severity of this issue, with the recent closure of the Polish Club - a rare example for its rejection of pokies - rendering lost some 18 months of performance opportunities and subsequent revenue. That performance arts practices are so perilously linked to the fragile state of suitable public spaces sees most people turn away from professionally pursuing the arts in Canberra. They correctly see the path as financially unviable. This leaves our rich, unique and vibrant culture going tragically unrepresented and uncelebrated as a result.

There is a visible trend that dooms those who hope to improve the situation in this unbalanced market. Those passionate enthusiasts that optimistically decide to run a venue - and let's be clear, it is only enthusiasts who make such sub-optimal business decisions - are competing with behemoths that can subsidise their food and drink to lure punters. The deck is unevenly stacked, and the venue-owners either eventually burn out or their financial backers run out of good will.

Not only do the clubs stifle the organic communities that would exist, but they themselves no longer hold any resemblance to the communities they initially were designed to foster. Why should the handful of Austrian Canberrans need a clubhouse and gambling revenue source where the equivalent Lithuanians do not? It is patently absurd that the Ainslie Football Club would need hundreds of millions to run a few teams - a function served in other communities for a microscopic fraction of that cost. Less people attend Ainslie's NEAFL games than the shows I routinely put on. Yet imagining that the Canberra Musician's Club held an equivalent source of revenue would be absurd. Even discounting the indisputable harmful impacts of the activity.

The clubs' dependence on pokies revenue betrays the reality that they are simply no longer representing genuine communities. Worse, they are blatantly crushing those that would exist without their uncompetitive market advantage.

ClubsACT will doubtless point to all the good that their members do for the community. As true as this is, it is inevitably work conducted through a false incentive structure and the revenue source is deeply tainted. Societies around the nation and indeed the world are able to operate all of their sporting, cultural and community activities without filtering them through the suffering of addicts. We are one of the richest and most generous people in the world and must surely aspire to do the same.

I hope that the committee takes this reality into consideration and moves swiftly along a path to remove these machines from a part of society that they should never have infected. Some clubs would certainly suffer, but this is surely because their membership base is founded on securing gambling revenue, rather than on any legitimate engagement with the communities they claim to represent.

Through no fault of their own, the clubs represent a vile distortion that crushes the liberty of Canberrans to express our own culture. If the Committee can recommend freeing but a little space and allowing Canberrans to determine their own society, we will all reap the rewards that are already lying just beneath the surface.

Kind regards,

Chris Endrey