Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into Canberra's Night-Time Economy

Submission number: 017b - Supplementary submission

Submitter: Fiction Nightclub, ONE22 Bar and Vent Nightclub

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Response to the ACT Government's Submission to the Inquiry into Canberra's Night-Time Economy

Dear Committee,

I write in response to the ACT Government's submission to the Inquiry into Canberra's Night-Time Economy.

As operators working directly within Canberra's night-time economy, we see these conditions play out in real time.

After reading the published submissions, a clear divide emerges between the evidence coming from operators, industry bodies and community stakeholders, and the position put forward by government.

Across the inquiry, venue operators, live music advocates, hospitality bodies, multicultural organisations and community voices describe a night-time economy under real strain. While they differ in emphasis, many point to the same structural issues: high operating costs, regulatory complexity, poor late-night transport, planning and noise conflict, weak coordination across government, and a lack of confidence that current settings are aligned with how Canberra's night-time economy actually functions.

The ACT Government's submission acknowledges some of the right themes in broad terms. It refers to reform work around liquor licensing, noise, planning, transport and safety, and it outlines existing initiatives such as city activations, small business support, public realm improvements and collaboration with cultural institutions. Those measures may have value, but they do not engage with the core commercial realities identified throughout this inquiry.

Most notably, the government submission does not appear to address insurance affordability, despite insurance being identified by operator-facing submissions as a serious constraint on viability. It also does not appear to address the portable long service leave levy, which some venue operators have identified as another material cost pressure at a time when margins are already strained. Nor does it meaningfully confront the repeated argument that ACT liquor licence fees remain uncompetitive when compared with other jurisdictions.

There is also a governance gap. Multiple submissions support some form of dedicated night-time economy leadership, whether as a commissioner, coordinator or dedicated office. The ACT Government submission acknowledges these interstate models but dismisses them as potentially unsuitable for the Territory without squarely answering the underlying concern: operators and stakeholders do not believe the current model is delivering clear accountability or coordinated reform.

Perhaps the most telling moment in the government's submission is its treatment of nightclubs. In 26 pages addressing the night-time economy, the word "nightclub" appears once. In that single reference, the government states that nightclubs have seen declines in patronage and consumer spend, and links this to cultural changes in attitudes to alcohol. Rather than examining the structural barriers making nightclub operations unviable, such as fees, insurance, labour costs and regulatory burden, the government characterises the decline as a consumer trend. That is not analysis. It is avoidance.

What the inquiry material shows is that Canberra does not merely need more promotion of the night-time economy. It needs structural reform that reflects commercial reality. A city cannot talk about a thriving night-time economy while leaving unresolved the issues of venue cost pressures, weak late-night transport, regulatory fragmentation and loss of operator confidence.

For most operators, Canberra is no longer a seven-night economy. It is a six-hour window on a Saturday night, and that window is shrinking.

Taken together, these omissions are not incidental. They reflect a consistent failure to engage with the core pressures facing the sector, and a government submission that prioritises the appearance of activity over the substance of reform.

The Committee should therefore treat the ACT Government submission as incomplete rather than conclusive. Existing programs and activation initiatives are not enough on their own. The evidence before the inquiry supports stronger action on at least five fronts:

1. Genuine liquor fee reform based on risk and interstate competitiveness.
2. A formal response to the insurance crisis affecting venues and live entertainment operators.
3. Late-night transport aligned with actual trading hours.
4. A dedicated night-time economy leadership function with clear accountability.
5. Planning and regulatory reform that protects and grows venues rather than slowly squeezing them out.

In short, the gap in this inquiry is no longer a lack of evidence from industry. The gap is the refusal of the government submission to properly engage with that evidence. Without that engagement, meaningful reform will not occur.

Yours sincerely,

Josh Dotta