

**FIG. 1. Northern Territory Aboriginal communities with licensed clubs, 2013**



Cartography: Michael Braund 2013

long time. For Aboriginal people and their organisations, the history of race-based restrictions on the right to consume alcohol imbues any decision about availability or restriction with political overtones and gives it a heightened symbolic value. For politicians and town councils, provoking public commentary about the possibility of alcohol sales in community-based clubs provides a desirable *frisson* of media attention and public debate, and for this reason they have become a fruitful way of leveraging ‘new’ policies.

This discussion paper analyses what went wrong with the canteens and early clubs in remote Indigenous communities. Factors include:

- the arbitrary nature of the clubs’ development
- the misplaced optimism over elders’ authority

- poor understandings of the process of social learning
- ignorance of the embedded nature of Aboriginal drinking cultures
- a bureaucratic failure to provide adequate monitoring, guidance and support to clubs.

This analysis will hopefully introduce some caution to current policy debates in which alcohol outlets in remote Indigenous communities are once again on the agenda.

### Drinking laws in Australia—a history of liberalisation

Policies controlling the availability of alcohol at the retail level have been in place in Australia since the nineteenth century. In the 1880s, alliances of temperance societies successfully lobbied for local option or ‘local veto’ laws, which allowed ratepayers to ban or restrict the number of hotels in their locality. This early form of localised control over supply had strong popular support and was implemented to varying degrees in all Australian colonies apart from Western Australia (Fitzgerald & Jordan 2009; Lewis 1992).

After federation in 1901, Australian states implemented Sunday closing of liquor outlets. By 1916, there was six o’clock closing in South Australia, New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania as a result of the temperance influence (Room 1988). This early closing time was famously responsible for the ‘six o’clock swill’ and its scenes of hectic after-work boozing. It even had the effect of altering the physical layout of hotels, with long bar counters proliferating to allow the press of drinkers to be served quickly.

However, in the 1950s and 1960s, the state-by-state demise of the six o’clock swill marked a turning point in liquor control. These were times of social and cultural change in which the influence of temperance ideas in Australia had waned<sup>9</sup> and attitudes towards alcohol had softened, so that it was no longer seen as a dangerous commodity. With the rise of prosperity, consumerism, tourism and the notion of leisure, retail liquor outlets proliferated and diversified. As states reviewed and amended their Liquor Acts in the mid 1960s, alcohol policies were liberalised. The decade that followed was marked by a wave of consequences.

#### *The effects of liberal drinking laws*

While each state differed in the detail, liberalisation meant longer, later hours and Sunday sales. Bottle shops could now sell single bottles of alcohol for consumption