



# Hypocrisy greets (another) closure of the Collingwood Tote

Richard Allsop

It was hard to miss the recent closure of an inner urban Melbourne pub.

For days the media at both state and national level covered the story, and even *The 7.30 Report* devoted several minutes to it. This particular pub had a long-held reputation as one of Melbourne's best live music venues.

And, as the extensive media coverage showed, the sophisticated supporters of live music can generate much more positive media coverage than users of other forms of entertainment in licensed premises such as pre-recorded music or gambling.

Overly stringent regulation is not a usual complaint of these people. Usually they are bleating in favour of tighter controls of their main competitor for space in licensed venues, gambling. How often have you heard music types complain that too many pubs have been taken over by poker machines, a view most famously promoted in The Whitlams song 'Blow up the Pokies'?

All of which is deliciously ironic given the name of pub—The Tote.

That is 'tote' as in totalisator. The hotel is called The Tote in honour of its location on the same patch of dirt in Johnston Street, Collingwood behind which John Wren ran Australia's most famous illegal totalisator. This is sacred ground for anyone with an appreciation of Australian cultural history.

At a time when gambling was tolerated for the wealthy, but frowned on for others, Wren broke the mould. And just as pokies are the most stigmatised

form of gambling today, Wren copped it from many directions, and from both ends of the political spectrum. In Wren's day, neither the right nor left thought the working class should gamble; the former believing that gambling should remain a pursuit confined to the leisured upper classes, while the latter thought gambling was designed to distract the working class from their revolutionary duty.

In the end, it was the left, chiefly Frank Hardy in *Power Without Glory*, who did most to destroy Wren's reputation. On the basis of Hardy's unsubstantiated accusations, Manning Clark described Wren as 'a preyer on humanity'. Oddly, this 'preyer' operated his tote fairly and only took 10 per cent of turnover, a lower figure than today's TABs extract from their punters.

Wren's tote was forced to close in 1907, but for decades SP bookies were an institution in Australian pubs, contributing at least as much to the richness of the culture of the nation as most pub bands. However, TABs came and fashions changed. In many inner urban pubs the arrival of rock bands in the 1960s and 1970s would have been as traumatic to traditional pub patrons, as their removal is to their devotees in the 2010s. Supporters of change in one era become the conservatives in another.

Of course, those wanting to keep pubs much as they have been in recent decades do not see themselves as conservatives. They see themselves as socially enlightened and the socially enlightened always have high expectations that government regulation will deliver positive outcomes. When there is an unintended consequence they are mightily surprised. None of the socially



Protesters outside The Tote in January 2010. Creative Commons 2.0 | flickr.com | lkaInk

enlightened took too much notice of the Brumby Government's new licensing laws until they affected a venue the socially enlightened really liked.

Surely, it was not intended that these new regulations, designed to stop violence around licensed venues, would impose such extra costs on The Tote that it would turn a profitable business into an unviable business. Surely, regulation should only restrict venues with no artistic merit!

Some people like watching bands, some people like gambling, some people even like both. The State Government's new rules are undeniably ridiculous, but they would be equally ridiculous if they were forcing the closure of any business. The fact that they have caused the closure of one of Melbourne's prime live music venues leaves more than just the residual smell of decades of sweat and spilt beer. There is a definite whiff of hypocrisy in the air.

One could argue that it would actually be appropriate if, just over one hundred years after Wren was forced to close his business, gambling could be returned to the site of The Tote.

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