

Stop addicts shaping our grog policies

By Noel Pearson

The Australian 23 December 2003

This text and other texts by Noel Pearson can be downloaded from www.capeyorkpartnerships.com.

The indigenous Alice Springs-based television company Imparja has decided to accept alcohol advertising as part of its commercial content.

Imparja is a private, fully commercial company owned and controlled by indigenous organisations.

Imparja says the ban on alcohol advertising in an indigenous-owned mass medium is meaningless because of increased exposure to mainstream media that advertises alcohol, and that it is a better strategy to use 30 per cent of revenues generated by promotion of alcohol to educate on the dangers of abuse of alcohol and other substances.

It beggars belief that Imparja Television thinks that an indigenous organisation can allow itself to promote the message "drink alcohol" when indigenous people are beginning our long and arduous journey towards economic and social integration, and real self-determination, which requires us to first take up the battle against the social, cultural and political power of addiction.

The reaction to Imparja's decision has been negative.

The critics' main argument has been that substance abuse is severe in many indigenous communities and that people should not be encouraged to drink alcohol.

Imparja and the company's critics have in common that they talk about the importance of education and influencing attitudes.

However, most commentators shy from the disturbing central fact about many remote communities with pervasive substance abuse problems: the most important immediate struggle is not in the area of education about drugs, alcohol and petrol sniffing because education and rehabilitation cannot significantly reduce the already large groups of addicts.

In many indigenous communities, large groups will oppose and are opposing any attempts to do something decisive against substance abuse.

This fact has implications for what our priorities must be.

The immediate goal is to rebuild intolerance of abusive behaviour in indigenous communities to a level where functional and responsible people, not addicts and irresponsible people, set the tone of daily life.

Polarisation and increased internal battles cannot be avoided.

This is at odds with the official rhetoric about reconciliation. Convention requires that people who are engaged in reconciliation work “with” indigenous people.

Reconciliation is generally understood to be a matter of acknowledging wrongs, giving indigenous people rights and opportunities, and fighting attitudes and opinions in mainstream society that are detrimental to the advancement of indigenous people.

But we must concede that one of the strongest political opinions that will oppose indigenous progress will come from *within* indigenous communities. Immediate enforcement of social order is necessary to achieve the long-term goals of reconciliation and integration into the mainstream economy.

Our policy in Cape York Partnerships is aimed at economic integration, but our policy is anti-assimilationist and aiming at biculturalism and bi or multilingualism.

However, even if we retain our identity and rebuild our homelands, economic integration will require increased geographic mobility for indigenous people. We want to give young indigenous people a chance to embark on orbits in the wider world, without relinquishing their ties to their homelands altogether. They *can* have the best of both worlds.

Social order in remote indigenous communities will be critically important for geographic mobility and economic integration. Children in remote communities need peace and a good start in life, otherwise they will not be able to make the transition to education and training in urban centres.

The Beattie Labor Government in Queensland has introduced legislation that allows community justice groups to develop alcohol management plans. There is no total prohibition of alcohol in Queensland communities, but most justice groups have realised that it is necessary to ban private importation and takeaways from the community taverns, so that sly grog can be identified and confiscated.

Where there is policing of the alcohol management plans, the Queensland trials have led to social improvements that could be the beginnings of reducing indigenous disadvantage. However, faced with this evidence, large groups of community members still wish to ease the restrictions in ways that will jeopardise the best progress that has been seen for decades.

The driving force of this opinion is not a consideration for civil rights.

It is addiction that is manifesting itself as a local political force. If you want to see addiction mobilised into social, cultural and political forces, try to tackle substance abuse in any of our communities.

Other motivations for the anti-restriction opinion are profit, power and ideology, but addiction is the main motor.

The responsible community groups in Cape York Peninsula and other regions will need external help for a long time. Even then, at best they can keep the destructive

opinion in check rather than win it over.

Part of this external help is an absolutely consistent message that it is the substances, the behaviours and the addictions that are the real problems.

Noel Pearson is team leader of Cape York Partnerships.