Rev Basil Schild

Submission in Response to the

Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory Bill, 2011.

31 March 2012.

To the Chair of the Standing Committee on Community Affairs.

Dear Sir/Madam

Thank you for the invitation to respond to the Stronger Futures Bill.

For the last 15 years I have worked closely with the Lutheran Aboriginal families of Alice Springs who reside both within the town and in the 20 Town Camps that surround the town. This community numbers close to 2000 people across five generations. I have worked alongside Aboriginal Pastors and Parish workers in the provision of Pastoral Care to this community in partnership with the Alice Springs Lutheran Church.

Over the last 15 years I have taken part in over 100 funerals. Only two of those funerals were for non-Aboriginal people. In over 80% of the funerals I have conducted alcohol has been a significant factor contributing to the premature death of the individual.

Many Lutheran Aboriginal families struggle with the destruction and damage wrought by alcohol. Church elders and Parish workers also have their own battles with addiction.

Over the last few years I have become more and more appalled at the callous disregard shown by many sectors of the Central Australian Liquor Industry in respect to the damage caused by the sale of their products.

I have journeyed across the Town Camps of Alice Springs daily, every week month and year of the last decade and a half. I have seen the devastation wrought by alcohol on hundreds of families, including vulnerable children and youth. I have watched a generation of infants grow to adulthood in a sea of chaos and destruction precipitated by a non-stop flood of cheap alcohol.

Most Aboriginal children I know attend at least five funerals per year for family and loved ones. By the time the children are 10 years old they have been present at 50 funerals! By the time these children have grown into adulthood they will have attended almost a hundred funerals! Again, I underline, in 80% of the funerals I conduct, alcohol has played a key role in contributing to the early death of the individual, either through damage to health, intoxication leading to violence, motor vehicle accident, misadventure, rape, murder, manslaughter, suicide, depression..

The volume of take-away alcohol sold into Aboriginal families struggling with addiction is enormous – but the morning on-site bar sales are also incredibly damaging in the example they present to a generation of children who watch and witness the modelling of an all-day drinking culture.

The bars at the Todd Tavern and the Gap View Hotel open at 10 am, and close at 2pm. At 2pm these same businesses open their take-away outlets. By moving their drinkers off premise via their take-away outlets at this time, they do not have to witness the blood and carnage that so often occurs later as the afternoon drinking sessions take over from where the morning drinking session has left off. The fighting, death and other violent crime all happen off-site. By closing their bars in the afternoon these licensees are able to maintain that their premises remain clean and free of trouble and, moreover, to claim that they are responsible traders.

By the time I visit friends and acquaintances in the Town Camps in the late afternoon it is sometimes difficult to find a single adult who is not consuming alcohol. By the time the sun sets fighting is breaking out, and on so many evenings, for so many infants and children, the only lullaby that accompanies them to sleep is the sound of their mothers - and sometimes also their grandmothers, sisters, brothers, cousins, aunties, fathers - suffering the blows of domestic violence. If the owners of the alcohol licenses in Alice Springs were made to witness the carnage and destruction their profit margins are riding on, one wonders how could they ever continue to target these communities with their products?

Every year at least one member of our congregation is killed by their partner in an alcohol fuelled assault. In the year 2007 three members of our parish were murdered by their partners.

I have heard that sources within the industry have stated that two of the Alice Springs Liquor licensees sell such an enormous volume of Fosters product per annum that not only are they in the top 100 traders in the country but come in at positions number two and three respectively. In a township of less than 30,000 this is an astonishing figure.

Nearly 20 years ago the Australian Government conducted a Royal Commission into Deaths in Custody. Over the last decade only a handful of Aboriginal people in Central Australia have died in custody, but the number of Aboriginal people in Central Australia who have died as a direct result of alcohol abuse would number in the hundreds.
Where is the Royal Commission into the Central Australian Alcohol Industry? Why should the Retailers and Licensees not be made to open their books and share with the community the volume of sales they are making to Aboriginal Central Australians and the resulting profits they are banking? This industry is filling the cemetery. It ought to be held accountable and be thoroughly investigated.

While I support the introduction of a floor price for alcohol, I believe that a floor price itself will have only minimal impact on the massive volume of alcohol being sold to Aboriginal families struggling with addiction. A floor price will bring the cost of a standard drink up to match the cost of beer. And cheap beer is the drink of choice already wreaking havoc and death across Alice Springs and Central Australia.

Real changes with real teeth are required to limit the trading of alcohol into all families, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, struggling with addiction.

The morning bar trade in Alice Springs ought to be made illegal with no trade at all before midday. The current licensing regime which allows bars to trade from 10 am results in those bars that target Aboriginal families being full-to-overflowing by midday; possibly the only bars in the country that are full by midday monday to friday.

I am in full support of that element of the Stronger Futures Bill that allows the Australian Government to request the Northern Territory Government to appoint an independent assessor to examine particular alcohol licenses and the damage their sales are wreaking in their surrounding community. I am however deeply concerned that the legislation allows the NT the option of refusing the request.

Why legislation with no teeth? Why legislation that at the end of the day is no legislation at all? Why legislation that in effect only allows the Australian Government to 'wish' that something be done? Why this seeming abrogation of responsibility at the crucial moment?

I would counsel the committee to recommend a change to the legislation so that the NT Government no longer has the option of refusing the request to appoint an independent assessor.

The very small population of the NT (less than that of the ACT) means that both sides of politics find themselves overly familiar and connected to those who hold the Territory's liquor licenses. The circle connecting government, business and politicians in the NT is very small. It is inevitable that NT politicians will be even more reluctant to assent to a request to appoint an independent assessor than would be the case in other Australian States.

The opportunity to pass effective legislation concerning the wellbeing of the NT may not come again for sometime. I urge the Committee to strongly recommend a strengthening of the legislation to ensure that the NT government is not able to refuse the request an Australian Government may make in relation to requesting the appointment of an independent assessor.

Legislation that would allow the NT Government to in-effect thwart or undermine an investigation into the operation of individual licensees would be legislation that contributes to the harrowing and shameful tragedy unfolding around us. The task is too urgent. The scale of the violence and pain too large. The women's shelters too crowded. The cemeteries too full.

NT Governments of both political persuasions have had their chance. Liquor trading that deliberately targets Aboriginal families in Central Australia has happened on their watch. A stronger approach is needed. It must come from the Federal Government.

Other aspects of the Stronger Futures Bill:

Food Security.

I support those elements seeking to shore up food security in remote communities.

I have often thought that as the stores play such a key and pivotal role in relation to health outcomes on remote communities that the stores ought to be nationalized and run by the health department, and subsidised to ensure low prices for fresh and healthy food.

Alcohol Management Plans

I also support those elements of the Stronger Futures Bill seeking to strengthen alcohol management plans. Ineffective plans ought to be refused, and I support the legislation giving the Federal Minister the power to approve or refuse proposed alcohol management plans.

In conclusion:

Social drinking requires a community wide response.

Both sides of politics often speak of the need for alcohol rehabilitation facilities, and while they may be of use to some individuals, they are completely ineffective for most of those families with whom I minister.

In the context of Central Australia, alcohol addiction is not a personal addiction but a social addiction. Drinking, for Alice Springs families, is a social activity that provides a network in which many families interact, communicate, socialise and celebrate.

An individual who endeavours to stop drinking in an alcoholic world can find themselves marginalised from family and friends, alienated, humbugged and lonely. The pressure on an individual to join with the rest of a family in social drinking is difficult for people outside this sphere to understand, but it is considerable. In my estimation it is almost overwhelming. Individuals may successfully stop drinking while participating in a rehabilitation program or while in prison but upon returning to a family group where social drinking patterns remain the same, even those individuals who desire not to drink resume social drinking within a very short time frame. And in most cases, immediately. Many could testify to this experience.

Lowering the alcohol intake of communities in Central Australia and Alice Springs will only occur via steps that apply to the drinking community as a whole. Steps seeking to assist individuals, in the context of the drinking patterns in Central Australia, have, and will, invariably fail.

Steps to limit access to alcohol in Central Australia, across the board, need to be implemented. These include limiting on-site bar trading hours, limiting take-away alcohol trading hours to a narrow window (5pm till 9pm), annulling those licenses that target Aboriginal families struggling with addiction (you can tell which ones they are as they have drinking areas for Aboriginal drinkers which are not able to be accessed from the rest of

their establishments), and further limiting the amount of welfare money able to be spent on alcohol.

Thankyou for the opportunity to submit a response to the Stronger Futures Legislation.

Yours Sincerely

Rev. Basil Schild