Cape York Justice Study

Although the Government's response to the Cape York Justice Study was well intentioned it is very misguided and obviously thought up by people who have very little idea of how businesses or indigenous communities operate. The whole concept of taking away control of the canteens from Councils is badly flawed and obviously no thought has been given to how it is actually going to be put into practice on the ground.

The big question of course is how this Community Board of three community members, nominated by the Minister, and a bureaucrat living a 1000kms away, none of whom have any business acumen, experience or interest, can properly manage a community canteen. Add the advice from a Community Justice Group and I can categorically state that within months the business will be a basket case. These three members will just be lackeys of the Government bureaucrat.

To make a community canteen work profitably requires exceptional control mechanisms, moment to moment management and the full support of the Council. None of these factors will be present under the new arrangements and theft through cash and stock shortages will soon start to proliferate.

It will be interesting to see how the proposed Indigenous Community Liquor Licensing Bill 2002 stands up to the Human Rights Commission's anti-discrimination legislation, as from its title it is obvious that there is one Liquor Licensing Act for indigenous people and one for non indigenous people. Surely there should be one Act that applies to all Queenslanders equally.

There is further discrimination by "imposing strict conditions on hotels near indigenous communities......no liquor to be sold in 4 litre casks......and restrictions on the time of day that takeaways can be sold." Of course this only applies to indigenous people but will not apply to anyone else buying from the same hotel. Why not revert to the old days and just put up a sign that says "No alcohol sold to Blacks." God forbid!

Perhaps the Government can also answer the following questions in relation to who is going to pay for all the additional costs related to the operation of the canteen once the Council is removed. Such costs as:

* The additional Audit fee?
* The salary of the three Community Board members?
* The salary/travel cost of the Government representative on this Board.
* The cost of setting up a computerised point of sale, stock control and accounting system as Council will remove theirs?
* The cost of account-ancy and financial management expertise?
* The financing of large scale stock purchases?
* The cost of fitting out the canteen as Council will remove its fixtures.

You can bet your last dollar that the majority of these costs will be taken out of the canteen profits leaving Councils much worse off financially than before. At what time will these profits (if any) be distributed to Councils? Probably after the receipt of the annual Audited Financial Statements which can be 6-9 months after the year in which the profits were earned. At present the profits flow through on a daily basis. Will the Government pay interest on the profits it withholds for 12-18 months? Of course not!

Also who will hold the liquor licence and will Council be able to sue the Government for the loss of profits when things start going downhill, through increased costs and poor management. We all know how well the Government runs indigenous businesses. Just look at IBIS, which lost 83.5m in 18 months on its Island stores operations.

Who is going to pick up the pieces when drunkenness and lack of discipline starts to reappear because of lack of Council involvement and support for the canteen? The State Police are not on duty at the problem times and why should Council continue to supply Community Police to solve a problem that Council didn't create and previously had totally under control. The Government cannot have it both ways by taking the canteens away from Councils and then expect any Council involvement or support.

The Canteen Manager will become totally isolated with the loss of Council support and will be in no position to apply the Liquor Licensing Laws to discipline, or bar and arrest unruly drinkers.

And how will these three Board members feel, knowing that they are acting against the express wishes of the Council elected by the community. The pressures placed on them will be enormous and they will be far more likely to succumb to extended family pressures for free booze and a host of other privileges that will send the canteen broke, especially as they answer to someone 1000 kms away who will be totally unaware of what is going on.

Councillors are much more aware of conflict of interest issues and see a far bigger picture than these board members will.

Bamaga especially has very few problems and is a peaceful community with a well controlled and managed canteen. However because the Women's Shelter for the five Councils that make up the Northern Peninsula Area of Cape York is located in Bamaga, the statistics show that Bamaga has a problem. The truth of the matter is that the two biggest users of the facility are from the two neighbouring Aboriginal communities, one of which has its own canteen. This is what happens when people in Brisbane use statistics to make decisions without knowing the reality behind the figures.

As you said in your editorial, this is a very complex problem that cannot be fixed by social engineering policies by Government. It is an ever evolving process beginning with the education of the younger generation and overcoming dysfunctional family situations and the problems that cause them.

The Government's response is definitely not the answer as it is not the canteen itself that is the problem as Hopevale and Doomadgee have no canteen but are still badly affected by alcohol related problems. The only certain thing is that without Council input and support, the canteens will go backwards socially and financially and all communities will be worse off.

Well done Premier!
Chris Foord, CEO
Bamaga Island Council