



Barnett gets Halls Creek nightmare

Paige Taylor

IT is more than 2700km by road from Perth and only about 1300 people live there, but Halls Creek is turning into a sharp political pain in the side for the state Government.

The town's alcohol problem has placed Premier Colin Barnett in the unenviable position of having to weigh his party's support for the principle of free enterprise against the pleas of police and hospital staff for severe alcohol restrictions that would shut down the local bottle shop and the takeaway arm of the nearby hotel.

Barnett's empathy for those affected by alcohol abuse in Halls Creek is obvious, but there are several reasons why he might choose his words carefully when discussing solutions.

He and his ministers are mostly bystanders in the brawl over what alcohol restrictions should be imposed on the town.

This is because the state's director of liquor licensing, Barry Sargeant, does not answer to them. He will do as he sees fit without needing government approval, and he has asked the two licensees in Halls Creek to show cause why he should not ban all full-strength takeaway sales in town.

But Sargeant's powers are ultimately defined by parliament, and it is uncertain what would happen if Sargeant or his successor made rulings that the present or a future state government could not live with.

Formidable lobbyists in the form of the Australian Hotels Association are manning the barricades in the fight over Halls Creek. The sight of a calm, collected Bradley Woods, the AHA's West Australian secretary, debating Aboriginal hospital worker Robyn Long on ABC's *Lateline* on Monday night

should have created anxiety among chiefs-of-staff within the Liberal-Nationals alliance.

Woods is a powerful stakeholder in all things liquor in Western Australia, and media savvy.

The AHA's member in Halls Creek is Kimberley Hotel owner Martin Pierson-Jones, a career publican whose hotel interests in the region stretch from Broome to Kununurra. Halls Creek bottle shop owner Peter Tierney is not eligible to join the AHA, but he has hired lobbyist and public relations consultant David Christison to represent him in the battle.

The licensees argue that problem drinkers are in the minority in Halls Creek, but advocates for a ban on full-strength takeaway alcohol such as local elder Doreen Green say the abuse of alcohol is widespread.

Local doctor David Shepherd says the evidence is on his ward; teenage girls with fetal alcohol syndrome with their babies, who also suffer from the same syndrome.

In October 2007, it was different picture when a ban on full-strength takeaway alcohol was introduced in Fitzroy Crossing, 290km east of Halls Creek. The bottle shop and main pub in that town was owned by Leedal, an Aboriginal co-operative that was shamed when it was shown to have not distributed a cent of its profits to the indigenous communities it represented.

The public was appalled by what looked for all the world like a rip-off. The alcohol ban succeeded against the protests of heavy drinkers, Leedal and local businesses that had benefited from mass consumption of alcohol.

But the circumstances are not the same, and the outcome in Halls Creek is anyone's guess.