

Liquor laws hang sticky carpet out to dry

New hope for The Tote New liquor licensing laws aimed at curbing alcohol-related violence in Victoria are having the unwanted side-effect of forcing small venues to close or change the way they do business.

The laws came into effect at the start of the year but have already been blamed for the demise of one of Melbourne's most revered music venues - the Tote Hotel.

The pub closed its doors this week after 30 years at the centre of Australia's underground music scene, its licensees saying the new laws have made it too costly to go on. The Age's chief music writer, Patrick Donovan, says the closure will hurt Melbourne's vibrant music scene.

"It's a huge blow for Melbourne's reputation as one of the great live music cities in the world," he said.

"The Tote was probably the best rock'n'roll venue, it's a very unique venue."

Mr Donovan says the venue had a distinguished place among Melbourne's rock'n'roll scene.

"This place has 30 years [of history] and you can see it in the carpet, the famous sticky carpet," he said.

"It's a combination of alcohol - some say vomit - tobacco, and it sort of sums up the history of this place."

The Birthday Party, Spiderbait and the Dirty Three became household names to some after treading the infamous sticky carpet of the Tote's band room, along with ARIA award-winning artist Dave Graney. Mr Graney says the tough new liquor licensing laws show a lack of concern for the music scene.

"I think it's a terrible thing for the Melbourne music scene in general and the Brumby Government should have someone in there with a bit of sensitivity to the music scene," he said.

"If they want to have Melbourne paraded as an artistic centre, I don't know what they are up to."

"They are trying to win a Tidy Town award or something."

The liquor laws which came into effect at the start of the year, mean any venue playing live or amplified music after 1:00am must provide at least two security guards as well as security cameras. Licensed costs for these venues dubbed "high risk" by the liquor licensing board have also gone up, and with other costs like the cameras, almost permanent security guards and legal fees, venues like the Tote have found it too expensive to continue.

The Tote's licensee, Bruce Milne, says these costs made it virtually impossible to run the venue profitably.

"In the end, the Tote is a commercial business, I make no apologies for that," he said.

"I can't run it profitably under the "high risk" conditions, I can't run it profitably trying to fight liquor licensing, and I can't find a compromise."

Melbourne has seen a boom in late



night bars and clubs since liquor licensing was deregulated in the 1990s.

But it's also had a darker side with an increase in alcohol-related violence in the inner city.

The Victorian Consumer Affairs Minister, Tony Robinson, says the liquor laws were introduced in response to this increase.

"The new laws are part of an entire overhaul of our liquor licensing system, and that was announced by the Premier in 2008 as part of a response to an unacceptable rise in antisocial activity," he said.

"A lot of that is related to the operation of licensed premises across the state." But Mr Donovan says laws mean the Tote is paying the price for inner city violence. "It's totally unfair, I mean there's no violence here," he said.

"The Tote has been a scapegoat for the violence of the inner city, the King Street beer barns and strip clubs and, for me, that's not Melbourne at all."

What irks the licensees of small bars, pubs and restaurants is that they're now lumped in the same class of venue as the big nightclubs and strip joints in the city that is seen as the cause of many problems.

Jim Pothitos has been running his restaurant at the fashionable end of Melbourne's Chapel Street for 25 years. He says he had to stop having live traditional Greek music because new laws require him to station bouncers at his front door.

"It's a deterrent, it deters people away from coming into your restaurant," he said.

"Automatically they think that two burly guys standing outside my restaurant would scare people away."

Mr Pothitos says he is unhappy about being bundled in with some of the city's more troublesome venues.

"I feel slightly insulted about that because we are a food premises," he said. "We have mature people who come in - we do have young people who come in, but they are also mature in their attitude towards food and the responsible drinking of alcohol."

Like Mr Pothitos, the Tote's licensee Bruce Milne argues the lack of violence and police calls to his premises should allow it to be exempt from the same "high risk" category.

"The Tote's licence allows us to open until 3:00am on Thursday, Friday and Saturdays, therefore we are high risk," he said.

"And then the conditions apply across the board and that's the problem for us."

"We just would like to argue that... if we've got a proven history of non-vio-

lence, we are not a 'high risk' venue and would just like some consideration for that." But Consumer Affairs Minister Tony Robinson says the liquor laws are justified. "To suggest that we could only have live music venues that could successfully operate in Victoria by turning a blind eye to necessary conditions on the way in which those premises operated is a dangerous area in which to get to," he said.

The Tote's demise is the latest in a string of closures across the country which has almost silenced live music in the inner city. Pubs like Sydney's famous Hopetoun Hotel have also been forced to shut as new neighbours refuse to live with loud music into the early hours of the morning.

Many now believe live music venues are facing a slow death.

Wally Kempton, of band The Meanies, says the closure of venues makes life extremely difficult for aspiring musicians. "[For] a lot of bands, this is pretty much one of the only pubs they can draw a crowd at, with its sort of music that is hosts," he said.

"It's just dire - if it goes unnoticed, then we're stuffed."

Musician Dave Graney says that security companies are the only ones likely to benefit from the changes.

"Venues are being closed down," he said. "It's a really great time for the security industry but a bad time for musicians." Mr Robinson says the Victorian Government is not to blame for the decline in music in Melbourne's inner city. "I don't accept for a minute that the sole outcome of our changes is going to be the diminution of live music in Melbourne," he said. "There are all sorts of reasons why the provision of music and entertainment across Melbourne has changed over the years."

But Mr Robinson does concede there may be room for compromise as licensees indicate problems with the new system. "We always knew when we introduced this new licensing system that there'd be some further refinements we could make," he said.

But any changes will come too late to save the Tote Hotel.

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