Leviathans of Leisure? - The Licensed Club Sector within the Economic and Community Life of Canberra

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Abstract

Licensed clubs (or registered clubs as they are formally known in some states) are a poorly understood organisational phenomenon within the leisure, community, and economic geographies of Australia’s cities. This paper accordingly seeks to better conceptualise these clubs as a diverse category of organisation, emerging and changing with the unfolding of Australian urban life. Following some preliminary description, licensed clubs are generally theorised as hybrids, located between the spheres of ‘the economy’ and ‘community’. The paper then specifically observes public attitudes towards clubs, and develops a typology of the organisational behaviours of local clubs in the context of a particular Australian city – Canberra. In analysing this material, it is noted that the sometimes ambiguous organisational behaviours of clubs, given competing commercial and community demands, can pose challenges for urban governance practice. However, in doing so it is emphasised that this very ambiguity may imply that clubs deserve to be seen within contemporary public debates neither simplistically as ‘mini-casinos’, nor as bastions of ‘a community way of life’, as their detractors and defenders respectively suggest, but in their own distinct terms.
Licensed clubs (or registered clubs as they are sometimes formally known) have long been both a popular and contentious organisational phenomenon within the economic and community lives of Australian cities. Their proponents characterise them as bastions of ‘a community way of life’ [2] within a wider ‘clubs movement’. Conversely, their detractors have alleged that these discourses of community obscure growing harm among vulnerable individuals and localities, caused by the insidious expansion of the sector, predicated on the promotion of gambling.

While licensed clubs can be found in all Australian cities, and some general observations will be made, this paper gives particular empirical focus to Canberra, which is simultaneously both the national capital of Australia, and a socially and economically distinctive medium-sized city [3]. In comparison with the state capitals and other medium-sized cities, Canberra’s economy and social life is characterised by relatively high levels of employment in government services, and migration churn, as (among others) public servants, defence force personnel, and students, pass through the city before moving on (or being posted) elsewhere. Thus while the club sector has many common features across Australia (and New Zealand), it is analytically imperative to pay attention to the situations of clubs within the local social, business, and governance networks and patterns of individual cities [4].

For the purposes of introductory definition, and clarification of the title of this paper for readers not familiar with popular leisure in Australasia, the
motif of the ‘leviathan’ is used here vis-à-vis clubs in two senses. First, akin (if not perfectly so) to Thomas Hobbes’ account of leviathans as forms of social organisation, such clubs are premised in law and policy as entities based on the principal of mutuality – or the (voluntary) combination of individuals for a common purpose, in this case for leisure (rather than Hobbesian political order). Specifically, such clubs receive various forms of generally advantageous status across jurisdictions in recognition of their role in the pursuit of recognised form of a communitarian ‘good’. Most commonly the good to be advanced is of a sporting nature, but ethnic/cultural, workers/trade union, and veteran-orientated clubs are also not uncommon. It should be noted that club membership is generally easily obtainable (i.e. there are usually few formal procedural restrictions to joining a club and annual membership fees are usually not onerous. In the ACT, the average charge is $13, ACG 2008: 34). Further, their relevant legislation dictates that clubs’ boards of directors are to be democratically accountable to their memberships and that certain decisions (e.g. such as, for example, to acquire or dispose of gambling machine licenses) must be made by a ballot of the membership.

Overall, this membership-orientation, in combination with the requirement that they cannot pay dividends and that thus any surpluses must: 1) be reinvested in facilities, or 2) subsidise goods and services to members, or 3) be distributed for approved community uses, is usually presented as the legitimating basis for the club sector within political discourse (cf. Hing 2006).

The second sense in which clubs may be collectively understood as leviathans is in terms of their expansion and scale as important players in the leisurescapes and night-time economies of Australian cities, competing with
(among others) pubs, restaurants, hotels, and casinos. According to the
industry’s national peak body, as of the late 2000s, there are approximately
4000 club venues across Australia, with 10 million memberships (within a
national population of approximately 21.8 million - although some individuals
are members of more than one club), collectively with a combined turnover of
$7.3 billion (Newell 2008: 4-6). While this state of affairs is unproblematic for
many, for others, and particularly those concerned with their business
practices related to gambling, such scale and growth, especially when
concentrated among a small number of larger club groups, is sometimes seen
as cause for disquiet (see, for example, Houston 2009).

Against these preliminary propositions of clubs as leviathans within the
economic, leisure, and community lives of Australian cities, this paper first
discusses these organisations against existing theory. Subsequently, an
empirically-based typology of Canberra’s club sector is developed and
potential general future research and policy implications are discussed.

Theoretical Perspectives on Licensed Clubs within Urban Economies
and Communities

The production and consumption of goods and services associated with the
practice of leisure has long occupied an important place in urban economies
and urban life more generally. Further, as John Hannigan (1998) and many
others have noted, leisure and entertainment based strategies – often tied in
with elements of retail, cultural performance, and education – have recently
found particular favour among urban governance practitioners and the
development industry. Whether through the deliberate fostering of ‘night time economies’, the practices of ‘cultural planning’, or the creation or attraction of major sports and arts franchises and events, the provision of leisure permeates the concerns of publics and policy-makers in cities across Australia and globally (see, for example, Beer 2009; Rowe et al 2008; Stevenson 2004; Garcia 2004; Hobbs 2003).

In this context, within urban economies, and in terms of their particular legislative and policy treatment, the club sector can be seen as a distinctly Australasian category of non-profit firm, or in the phrasing of Geoff Caldwell (1972) ‘leisure co-operatives’. Within mainstream economic theorisation of firms, non-profits are usually conceptualised as a sub-form of firm with goals other than profit-maximisation. In the case of clubs, this non-profit status via the principle of ‘non-distribution’ (or the non payment of dividends) is clearly legally set out. Although there is some recognition that certain non-profit firms may emerge exogenously (i.e. to provide supply, as such), generally they are portrayed as demand-driven competitors in particular markets, providing goods and services that would be problematic for ‘normal’ commercial enterprises (Krashinsky 1997; Marwell and McInerney 2005).

However, empirically, while many clubs in Australian cities do provide certain services that are unlikely to be provided by for-profit firms, they nonetheless also have a very clear place in many geographic markets in providing goods and services that would almost certainly be otherwise provided by for-profit firms. Specifically, as a result of the historical development of their regulatory environments [5], clubs dominate the provision of gaming machine services in most Australian jurisdictions, and as
noted above are significant actors in providing dining, drinking, and entertainment services. Frequently, this is in part due to their competitive pricing through cross-subsidisation from gaming revenues. Overall, clubs as organisations have two important theoretical implications. First, through the commercial activities, they are an important collective entity in the potential translation and use of the British-originating ‘night time economy’ as an analytical concept in the Australian urban context (Rowe et al 2008; Hobbs 2003). Second, the (generally suburban orientated) club sector’s standing within the Australian gambling industry is an important point of difference in comparison with the emphases given to (usually downtown) casinos in the urban regeneration projects of Australasia, Western Europe, and North America over the last three decades. More broadly, as data on the gambling modes of Australians notes (cf. Productivity Commission 1999: 10), licensed clubs have been key bearers of the growth of gambling.

The role of clubs as economic actors is, however, only one side of their significance within Australian cities, whether in terms of the leisure industry or otherwise. Along with their practice as leisure cooperatives or non-profit firms, licensed clubs can also be seen as community organisations of various forms. Accordingly, they can be conceptualised in a number of ways in terms of the literature on ‘community’, as such (see, for example, Nisbet 1976; Bauman 2001; Delanty 2003). Importantly, they are changing or dynamic rather than static institutions. Thus there may be important qualitative shifts in the forms, intensity, and meanings of social connection for which they may be a locus. By way of example, the mores and regulations of the Queanbeyan Leagues Club of the early 1970s as ethnographically described by Caldwell (1972) in
terms of things such as dress codes, membership vetting processes, and
gender relationships, may come across as distinctly distanced from the more
recent experiences of a contemporary reader. Overall, as forms of community
or associational organisation, clubs may be formed as an institutional or
localised expression of a pre-existing form of broader community – often
ethnic or religious. Alternatively, they may be formed specifically as
communities for themselves, as a new community as such around a particular
place or interest – often sporting. Finally, in terms of social significance, clubs
can also be seen not as sites of community formation, but as simply venues
where existing forms of social connection – from long-standing friendships
through to weaker ties such as passing acquaintances – are played out (cf.
Simpson-Young 2008).

In the broader context of urban community organisations, parallels (if
imperfect ones) can be drawn between Australia’s and Canberra’s clubs and
both the gentlemen’s and workingmen’s institutes and clubs of British modern
history. Specifically, as Tristram Hunt (2004) relates, with their emphases on
civic and personal improvement, and voluntary association, such forms of
organisation were a definitive feature of the liberal order of the Victorian cities
of the United Kingdom, and by extension, are identifiable as fellow-travellers
of contemporary Australasian clubs. However, the distinctiveness of
Antipodean clubs, particularly in terms of their broad appeal and operation
across much of the social stratification spectrum, should again be
emphasised. Within Australian social history, the growth of the club sector as
mass places of leisure in New South Wales (NSW) and the Australian Capital
Territory (ACT) is essentially a post-1945 phenomenon. As Caldwell (1972)
relates, with the first half of the twentieth century being characterised by a strong temperance movement, following the end of the Second World War, the NSW government sought to reform the sale of alcohol through adopting the upper-middle class club as its preferred mode of liquor licensing. In doing so it was ultimately hoped that the ‘sordid’ working men’s pub would be displaced, with the privileges of clubs vis-à-vis pubs (such as much later permitted closing times) engendering greater responsibility among their patrons. Accordingly, the number of clubs grew rapidly in NSW from 85 in 1945 to 1,461 by 1971. This model thus formed a basis for subsequent imitation by clubs and their regulators in the ACT, with the number of clubs in Canberra also growing from 1 in 1944 (NCDC 1965: 63) to, 17 in 1956, to 36 in 1972 (Caldwell 1972: 199), and to 66 licensed venues today.

Despite their prominence, within the economic and community lives of Australian cites, clubs *qua* clubs remain somewhat under-examined as a distinct category of organisation (see, for a review of existing research, Simpson-Young 2008: 43-45). Aside from the work already noted, most analytical attention of clubs as clubs has been undertaken by those seeking to set or influence government policy settings. Recently within this literature, the *Review of the Registered Clubs Industry in NSW* by the NSW state government’s Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal (IPART) (2008), and various documents of lobbying commissioned by peak bodies such as ClubsNSW and ClubsACT and undertaken by consultants stand out. Beyond this, there is generally only work into associated fields – such as gambling behaviours – that may discuss licensed clubs tangentially. This paper thus
seeks to build from and improve our understanding of clubs from this situation.

**Observations on Canberra’s Licensed Clubs and their Patrons**

Against this general theoretical backdrop, the place of licensed clubs within the economic and community geographies of Canberra as a city will be examined here in two ways. First, consideration will be given to public attitudes and use of clubs. Second, a typology based on the various observable commercial and community organisational behaviours of clubs will be advanced.

**Public Attitudes and Behaviours**

‘[Being] blackballed from a Canberra club shouldn’t worry you. Just start one of your own. There is at present one licensed club for every 5,000 men, women, and children in the ACT. Workers and tradesmen have them, Catholics and Masons, Scots and Croats, Spaniards and academics, yachtsmen and public servants, footballers and Polish ex-servicemen.’


As the above quote suggests, licensed clubs have historically had an important place in the social and economic life of the ACT, and although the
sector has been subject to important organisational, demographic, commercial, and regulatory changes, the ratio of 1 club per 5000 people noted by Fitzgerald roughly holds as of 2009, over 30 years later. Recently, the popularity of clubs has been made evident through a variety of research projects. As the table below outlines, investigators of local leisure behaviours and public attitudes have consistently found very high use rates of clubs among adult residents of the ACT:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Overall Club Usage Finding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2009 – Winston Sustainable Research Strategies (n = 1000 ACT residents)</td>
<td>86% of participants reported use of Canberra licensed clubs in the previous 12 months.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008 – Allen Consulting Group</td>
<td>On average each adult in the ACT is a member of 1.9 clubs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004 – Artcraft Research (n= 650 residents of the Gungahlin district and suburb of Dunlop)</td>
<td>64% of participants reported use of Canberra licensed clubs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004 – Marshall et al (ANU) (n = 2,447 residents of the Tuggeranong district)</td>
<td>78% of participants reported use of Canberra licensed clubs.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table One: Recent Studies of Public Attitudes and Use of Clubs in the ACT

Note: The Marshall et al study was commissioned by the ACT Government's Gambling and Racing Commission, the Allen Consulting Group study was commissioned by the lobby group ClubsACT and the other two studies were commissioned by the ACT Planning and Land Authority.

Further, this research suggests broad popularity of clubs as places of leisure across all major social cleavages, despite their sometime association with

‘…no socio-economic or demographic group has a participation rate below 66% [i.e. widowers having the lowest rate of use], a reflection of the universal appeal of clubs in the ACT to all social groups.’ (Marshall et al 2004: 69)

Similarly, the 2009 study commissioned by ACT Planning and Land Authority found that no demographic group had a (self-reported) use rate in the previous 12 months of less than 83% (i.e. in the case of persons with a tertiary degree or diploma), and no geographic group had a use rate of less than 77% (i.e. among residents of the Inner South, Canberra’s most socio-economically advantaged sub-district). Overall, 40% of respondents reported visiting clubs at least once a fortnight. However, this survey also had important findings in terms of the bases of this apparent widespread popularity. When asked to nominate reasons why they viewed clubs favourably, respondents overwhelmingly nominated their role as places of eating, drinking, and associated socialisation, rather than as places of community as such, or as providers of community facilities such as sportsgrounds. While 60% of respondents valued clubs as ‘meeting places’ as a place to be ‘among friends’, or as sites of ‘companionship’, only 12% respectively noted their provision of sporting, recreation, or other form of community facility, and similarly only 8% noted ‘support for local sports teams’. In terms of negative attitudes, while 50% raised concerns about clubs’
gambling businesses and associated problem gamblers, interestingly, 27% of 
the sampled Canberra residents did not identify a single unfavourable 
dimension of the city’s clubs. Despite historical and contemporary concerns 
within Australian politics around the misuse of alcohol and associated 
disorderly behaviours, only 23% of respondents raised this as an issue. 

Overall, this data would appear to be broadly congruent with that 
recently commissioned by the sector itself (ACG 2008), suggesting that 
approximately 80% of adult Canberrans are members of at least one club, 
with the club sector as a whole having an aggregate membership of 510,000 
(against a total population of approximately 330,000 people). Further, it is 
reported that membership has grown by 25% between 2002 and 2008.

The Organisational Behaviours of Clubs

While individual clubs did exist earlier, the form of Canberra’s contemporary 
club sector, including emergence of what are now larger multi-site club 
groups, can be broadly seen as dating from the 1970s. Specifically, this 
coincides with the legalisation of ‘pokies’ in the Territory in 1976, the passage 
of the Liquor Act 1975, and with the decade also seeing the establishment of 
the Hellenic Club (1970), the Canberra Labor Club (1979), and the Vikings 
Group (1979). Along with these organisations, similarly, Poroch (1996) has 
detailed the long gestation process leading to the opening of the Catholic 
community-orientated Canberra Southern Cross Club in 1972. Collectively, as 
will be discussed below, these club groups now hold a central place within the 
sector in the city.
Moving through to the present, at an aggregate level within the city, the club sector is a significant generator of economic activity. In 2007, a survey of 31 club and club group members of ClubsACT (ACG 2008) found that these clubs employed 648 full-time, 116 part-time, and 1342 casual staff (within an approximate total workforce of 196,000 persons in the ACT - i.e. 1.1% per cent of the workforce has some sort of employment relationship with the sector). The total wages of these employees were $60.3 million – although notably this figure had actually decreased since the equivalent 2002 survey, and with there also being a 15% increase in staff numbers over the previous five years. The clubs reported total revenue of $272.5 million, of which 62.5% was derived from gaming machine operations. Collectively, the clubs held $211.3 million in assets (mostly clubs buildings and facilities), were indebted to the value of $72.6 million. Overall, there has been an ongoing tendency within the sector to argue that regulatory pressures (e.g. anti-smoking legislation, various interventions targeted at problem gambling) and social changes have challenged the sector financially (see, for example, ClubsACT 2007; and also Poroch 1996: 108). While this narrative is perhaps supported in the slight decrease in the total revenue reported by clubs between 2002 and 2007, it should also be noted though that the average profitability of clubs (as measured through the ‘Earnings Before Interest and Tax’ or EBIT metric) more than doubled between the 2002 and 2007 surveys, and has nearly trebled between the 1998 and 2007 surveys (ACG 2008: 15-16).

Despite this growing profitability, there has however been a certain pulling back in community development contributions across the sector as a whole. Overall, monetary expenditures and payments for recognised
community development activities fell by 15-20% between 2002 and 2008 (ACG 2008: 33-37). However, ACT Government data does continue to report that clubs’ contributions exceed the minimum 7% of net revenue set by the Territory’s legislation by some margin. For the 2006-07 reporting year, the ACT Gambling and Racing Commission (i.e. the relevant regulatory body) indicated that the Territory’s 63 club licensees contributed $12.8 million, or 11.74% of their net gaming machine revenue to recognised community purposes. In 2007-08, the clubs’ contributions totalled $14,604,445 (see table below). Overwhelmingly, these contributions are reported as falling into the ‘Sport and Recreation’ contribution category:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contribution Category</th>
<th>Amount ($)</th>
<th>Percent of Total (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Charitable and Social Welfare</td>
<td>1,001,331</td>
<td>6.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem Gambling</td>
<td>392,121</td>
<td>2.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sport and Recreation</td>
<td>10,689,198</td>
<td>73.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Women’s Sport</td>
<td>211,198</td>
<td>1.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Profit Activities</td>
<td>2,108,066</td>
<td>14.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Infrastructure</td>
<td>202,531</td>
<td>1.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>$14,604,445</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table Two: Community Contributions of ACT Clubs, 2007-08


Notes: The contribution categories are those set out in the Gaming Machine Act (2004). Examples of ‘Charitable and Social Welfare’ payments could include donations to The Smith Family or a drug/alcohol rehabilitation program. Examples of ‘non-profit activities’ include spending on Anzac Day commemorations or the provision of scholarships. Contributions for ‘community infrastructure’ could take the form of donations to a museum or for parklands. Women’s sport is treated as a sub-category of Sport and Recreation contributions, with
Aside from monetary payments and the provision of social infrastructure, and vis-à-vis a standard metric of the measurement of social capital, the local club sector also emphasises its role in providing opportunities for volunteers. Notwithstanding certain methodological difficulties, it is estimated that 2553 volunteers provided clubs with 186,243 hours of service in 2007 (ACG 2008: 38).

Against this general background of aggregate statistics, a more fine-grained picture of clubs and their economic and community behaviours can be developed. Clubs in Canberra and elsewhere are often disaggregated into various nominal community orientations (e.g. “ethnic clubs”, “sports clubs”, and so on). However, through drawing on multiple sources of data, more specific groupings of behaviours can be advanced as a useful heuristic in understanding Canberra’s clubs and the features they share with others in terms of their potential role building social connections, and their strategies within the city’s economy. In developing the following typology, behavioural observations were made from a number of empirical sources including annual reports, reportage and media statements, regulatory statements, as well as participant observation. In particular, attention was given to the interpretation of organisational emphases on:

- Seeking commercial growth through the acquisition of other clubs;
- Seeking commercial growth though the development of new club venues;
• Diversification into new business activities, including through redeveloping venues for other commercial purposes;
• Development of community or recreation facilities;
• Other forms of support for community or recreation activities.

This typology builds on that advanced by the Allen Consulting Group (ACG 2008: 3) based on annual gaming machine revenue, dividing Canberra’s club sector into ‘Large Clubs’ with more than $10 million of such revenue, ‘Medium Clubs’ with such revenue between $2 million and $10 million, and ‘Small Clubs’ with less than $2 million in gaming machine revenue annually.

Small Ethnic Clubs

Clubs within this category are single-site clubs with strong links to the maintenance of particular forms of ethnic community. Most are relatively well established and can be found in the older districts of Canberra (i.e. they were formed in the 1970s or earlier in the Inner North, Inner South, Woden or Weston). However, many have experienced demographic and potentially financial challenges as original members age, and have not been replaced by their children or later immigrants. From a multiculturalism perspective, they can be important locations of ethnic community activities (e.g. language classes, cultural performance groups, or seniors clubs), but often have a wider local clientele. Overall, such clubs can usually be seen as important places of social connectedness in the sense of providing a distinct common place for their respective identity-based groups.
Examples include the: Slovenian-Australian Association (Philip), Harmonie German Club (Narrabundah), Polish White Eagle Club (O’Connor), Serbian Cultural Club “St Sava” (Mawson), Canberra Irish Club (Weston), Italo Australian Club (Forrest), Australian Croatian Club (O’Connor), Austrian-Australian Club (Mawson), Akuna Club (Civic), Spanish Australian Club (Narrabundah).

Figure One: The Polish Club


Note: The Polish Club is located in the Inner North suburb of O’Connor – a typical ‘Small Ethnic Club’, which notably in 2008 removed its gaming machines.

Small-Medium Sports Clubs
Canberra’s smaller to medium sized sports club groups are typically orientated around a particular sport in a particular geographic district within the city. From a social connectedness perspective, many such clubs would appear to be important agents in the development of local sports both in terms of facilitating participation and, frequently, through the development of specialist facilities (e.g. bowling greens, enclosed ovals, or golf courses).

Examples include: Belconnen Soccer Club (two sites), Belconnen Bowling Club (Hawker), Belconnen Magpies (three sites), Eastlake FC (two sites), The Sports Club (Kaleen), Canberra FC (Deakin).

**Big Club Groups**

The ‘Big Club Groups’ can be distinguished from the other categories primarily through their scale and apparent ambition to operate as large multi-site networks of leisure venues. While they may devote considerable resources to supporting the activities of communities through grants or the development of facilities, these groups clearly also place considerable emphasis (and devote associated investment) to pursuing commercial growth. As has been noted as taking place in NSW and other states, this frequently occurs through the acquisition of existing smaller clubs (see Table 3, below). Alternatively, many clubs in this category have diversified into new business activities, including building hotels and conference centres, and residential property development (see also IPART, 2008, for discussion of similar trends in NSW).
Canberra’s ‘Big Club Groups’ include: the Canberra Southern Cross Club (seven sites), the Vikings Group (five sites), Raiders Group (five sites, plus one in Queanbeyan, NSW), Ainslie FC (three sites), Hellenic Club (three sites), Tradies Group, (two sites), and the Canberra Labor Club (four sites) [6]. To give a sense of the commercial size of these groups, in their annual reports for 2007-08, the Southern Cross group reported revenue of $38,318,690; the Labor Club group revenue of $29,112,265; and the Vikings Group, $35,597,544.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acquiring Group</th>
<th>Acquired Club</th>
<th>Date of Acquisition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Raiders Group</td>
<td>West Belconnen Rugby League Club (Holt)</td>
<td>2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hellenic Club</td>
<td>Canberra RSL (City)</td>
<td>2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canberra Southern Cross Club</td>
<td>Wests (Macquarie, Turner, Kaleen)</td>
<td>2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raiders Group</td>
<td>Canberra Royals Rugby Football Club (Weston)</td>
<td>2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canberra Labor Club</td>
<td>Weston Creek Football Club (Stirling)</td>
<td>2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ainslie FC</td>
<td>Canberra City Bowling Club (Braddon)</td>
<td>2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hellenic Club</td>
<td>West Deakin Bowling Club (Deakin)</td>
<td>2000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 : Acquisitions of Smaller Clubs by Larger Club Groups in the ACT since 2000
Figure Two: The Hellenic Club, Woden


Note: Pictured is the original venue of Canberra’s Hellenic Club, dating from the 1970s. The club has since acquired two further venues.

Exclusionary Social Clubs

Contrasting with most other club organisations is a category of clubs orientated around exclusionary membership processes, through mechanisms such as nomination and vetting processes, and relative high membership fees. All are located within the relatively socio-economically advantaged Inner South (i.e. an older district of Canberra, focused around Parliament House). While such clubs may be important venues of social connectedness among their limited-by-design memberships, they do not appear to make significant contributions to wider local community development (although it should
perhaps be observed that the National Press Club is noted for its significance within the national political community).

Exclusionary social clubs include: the Commonwealth Club (Yarralumla), Canberra Wine and Food Club (Forrest), Royal Canberra Golf Club (Yarralumla), National Press Club (Barton)

*Outliers*

The final category of clubs is something of a residual category for club organisations that do not readily appear to fit in any other category. This includes a number of single-site clubs, generally with either a very narrow or somewhat ill-defined community orientation. In contrast to other jurisdictions, veterans’ clubs are not prominent within Canberra, with there only being one (Canberra Services Club, Forrest) currently operating within the city, and notably in comparison to NSW, currently no Returned Services League (RSL) clubs. The scale of these clubs varies. Outliers include: Canberra Club (Civic), Canberra Services Club (Forrest), and the Canberra Racing Club (Mitchell).
Discussion – The Potential Benefits and Risks of Leviathans

‘[There is a tendency that] early goals of informal social interaction within comfortably furnished premises of restricted size are replaced by goals in which expansion and improvement are stressed, a trend reflecting general preoccupations of industrial society’

– Geoff Caldwell, Leisure Cooperatives (1972)

‘…in my opinion they’re now a big business instead of an RSL club. But they’re very good just the same.’

– “Merv” as quoted in Simpson-Young (2008: 101)

Canberra’s licensed clubs, as a collective sector, in both their construction vis-à-vis the law and policy, as well as in their organisational behaviours, can clearly not be simplistically dismissed as either narrow purveyors of ‘vice’ in the form of pokies and alcohol, nor reified as virtuous bastions of communitarian leisure. However, as the typology set out above shows, clearly not all individual clubs are comparable in their commitments to fostering social connection, or the extent to which they are orientated towards commercial expansion (for its own sake or otherwise) relative to other organisational goals. What is similarly clear is that clubs are adept – whether directly or through their lobbyists – at traversing both fields in public debates and understandings (cf. Hing 2006).
These differences within the wider club sector have important potential implications in terms of how clubs may contribute to the economic and community development of Canberra and other Australian cities. First, it should be said that the ‘bigness’ of Canberra’s big club groups and their counterparts elsewhere should not in itself be viewed negatively, or as necessarily problematising the legislative and policy differentiation between these organisations and their for-profit competitors (cf. Productivity Commission 1999). In so far as they emphasise investment in new (and presumably ‘better’) entertainment facilities, they are, if nothing else, matching the preferences of their memberships as articulated in the public attitudes survey discussed earlier. The public value of the diversification of clubs into business activities not directly linked to the provision of opportunities for social connection, or other forms of direct support of a recognisable community, as such, is however not always clear. Particularly, there is a distinct risk that involvement in such activities will see the permeation of alternative rationalities that may displace clubs’ earlier community commitments. In one manifestation of this, Simpson-Young (2008) has outlined in detail changes at an urban NSW club over time at the hands of a professionalised management regime, seemingly generally orientated towards reproducing behaviours that might be expected of a profit-maximising firm. Specifically, she notes the systematic displacement of older members and their associated community life in favour of a deliberate courting of the more lucrative business hospitality and convention trade of younger persons.

In countering such suggestions, the proposition is sometimes made by clubs that the provision of some communal goals (such as, for example, a
professional sports team) are only possible through support activities of a commensurate commercial scale, complexity, and competence. This is a compelling argument – with historic resonances throughout the body of communitarian thought (see, for example, Nisbet 1976). However, the validity of such arguments, in terms of observable linkages between means and ends, should be carefully considered in the cases of individual clubs. Put otherwise, recognition of the general principle that ‘big clubs are sometimes good’ should be attended by ongoing public scrutiny of the actual behaviours of clubs. Among other risks, larger clubs may crowd out smaller clubs – in terms of access to land and various forms of licenses – and consequently the potential particular benefits the latter may bring to the cultural lives of Australian cities.

Figure Six: The Braddon Club.

Note: The Braddon Club is a venue of the Raiders Group, adjacent to an enclosed oval maintained by the club and used for junior and senior rugby league.

Conclusions – Canberra and Clubs within Australian Cities

In general terms, this analysis of Canberra would appear to suggest that a mix of larger and smaller clubs reflecting the diversity of forms of contemporary urban association and community in Australian cities is desirable. Further, care should be taken within urban governance in ensuring that the legal and policy privileges of local club sectors are met with the fulfilment of public expectations of the advancement of mutuality-based communities.

While this account of the experience of Canberra and its clubs will be resonant in other locations, some local differences place caveats on ready comparisons. This is perhaps particularly the case in translating observations of interactions between club and gaming machine locations and the local geographic distribution of socio-economic disadvantage. Within Canberra, at the aggregate level of the suburb, the relationship (if any) between gaming machine density and relative community disadvantage or advantage is unclear. To compare what might be seen as poles in the popular geographic imagination of advantage and disadvantage, the Inner South and West Belconnen have roughly comparable populations (i.e. of approximately 25,000-30,000) and a similar number of gaming machines (i.e. 326 in the Inner South, 341 in West Belconnen). This perhaps suggests that the relative disadvantage of the latter can be better explained in terms other than the localised per capita presence or absence of clubs or gaming machines, given the general accessibility of gaming machines at the wider scale of a city (cf.
McMillen and Doran 2006; Young et al 2009). In drawing conclusions, while it thus may appear that gaming machines are not a major contributor to the concentration of disadvantage locally this may be less true in other cities. Similarly, although there is little compelling evidence of club organisations in the ACT specifically targeting disadvantaged localities in establishing new venues, this does not necessarily undermine claims around such practices elsewhere (see, for example, Houston 2009; Young et al 2009).

As a further point parallel to the above, as well as taking care in making comparisons across spaces, care should also be exercised in comparing clubs and the sector across time. As noted earlier, the world of the Queanbeyan Leagues Club described by Caldwell is distanced in any number of ways from the contemporary club sector of Canberra and elsewhere. Perhaps the most notable historic shift from the 1970s in terms of Canberra’s urban leisure economy though, is that the club sector as a whole appears to have lost its apparent previous competitive advantage over pubs and restaurants. Although making hard comparisons between the qualitatively different offerings of different venues is an intrinsically methodologically difficult task, it might be generally observed that many local clubs have clearly failed to change with the times to meet the tastes of large segments of Canberra’s younger middle class (if while nonetheless retaining popularity among older persons).

More broadly, in terms of future research directions, there is notably an absence of interpretive or ethnographic work which should be addressed (Calwell 1972 and Simpson-Young’s 2008 studies are notable exceptions). Such research into the meanings of clubs – including across differing age-
groupings of leisure consumers – would be of great interest to scholars of urban economies and communities and policy makers. Further, this work may very well help us better establish the causal (rather than co-relational) relationships between the geographic proximity or accessibility of gaming machines and problem gambling behaviours (cf. Gambling Research Australia 2008: 171-175; Young et al 2009). In so far as clubs, as such, are neglected by researchers, our understandings of these ‘leviathans’ within Australian leisure and cities will be somewhat poorer.

Endnotes

[1] The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the author and not those of the ACT Planning and Land Authority.

[2] The slogan of the peak body for the club sector in Canberra (ClubsACT).

[3] For those readers not familiar with the city, Canberra is relatively young, having been progressively developed as a federal national capital since 1913 for the Commonwealth of Australia created in 1901. This new capital was located in a previously rural area, remote from Australia’s established metropolises, within an enclave known since the late-1930s as the Australian Capital Territory (ACT). In physical distance, it lies approximately 250 kilometres south-west of Sydney and 650 kilometres north-east of Melbourne. Significantly, it is also a relatively small city in Australian terms in population with approximately 320,000 residents (this compares with Sydney and Melbourne each having approximately four million residents, and with all of the other Australian state capitals - apart from Hobart - having populations exceeding one million residents).
[4] In another example of the importance of local context, clubs in Perth and elsewhere in Western Australia significantly do not have gaming machines.

[5] Gaming machines were first legalised in NSW in 1956, and in the ACT in 1976. For much of this period clubs have generally been given distinct preference in the allocation of licenses. Notably, prior to their legalisation in the ACT there was considerable outflow of spending by ACT residents at the nearby clubs of Queanbeyan, NSW (see Calwell 1972; Stretton 1970: 40).

[6] In May 2009 the ACT division of the Australian Labor Party announced it would sell the Labor Club group to the Tradies Group (affiliated to the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union) for $25 million. However, it has been subsequently reported that following intervention from the national executive of the party that the sale has been called off.

References


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