

The Death Of Diversity?

The NSW Draft Code Of Practice For Dance Parties

By Sebastian Chan/Yellow Peril 1997

In April this year, the Ministry For Police was busy drafting a code of practice to apply to dance parties. Dance parties, or more specifically 'raves', have since the death of Anna Wood, become a major "youth problem" for the NSW Government and this draft code is best seen as an attempt to legitimate, legislate and regulate them. Not a great deal of the draft code is new and much of it simply brings together existing legislation from the building, zoning, planning, health and safety, and alcohol licensing sectors of government. Of what is new, there are both progressive and regressive clauses.

For any regulatory body, especially a bureaucratic one such as local and state government, diversity is an anathema. In their terms, it is easier to deal with one person than one hundred. The Draft Code, by choosing to legislate and legitimate, rather than ban outright, is a way of reducing the number of people putting on dance parties, raves or what-have-you, to a easily managed number. To this end the Draft Code is reluctant to define exactly what a dance party is, instead in the opening paragraphs it states what "dance parties usually involve", thereby maximising the number and types of events for which the Code's regulations are applicable. Amongst the several clauses are ones such as "young people as patrons"; a "late start and late finish"; but perhaps the most problematic clause of the entire document is that defining the size of a dance party as being from "50 to several thousand people". What this means in lay terms is that be your event can be as large as the 2000-plus massively-advertised FOD4 or as small as the 150 at the unadvertised Bunker parties, the exact same regulations will apply. So, what do these regulation include?

The aim of most Government regulations is to ensure that a society runs relatively harmoniously and its citizens are not unduly harmed or put at risk. On the whole this is the aim of the Draft Code when it brings together the vast array of existing Environmental Planning and Local Government regulations into one coherent section. The required number of toilets, first aid staff, licensed security guards, and space per patron is specified; regulations pertaining to the visibility and placement of exits and requirements to notify and alert local emergency services are spelt out; and a handy flowchart and suggestions of how to obtain local council approval for a venue is provided. These regulations, far from applying only to raves in 'unique locations' such as warehouses and National Parks, are also deemed to apply to those in licensed premises such as pubs, registered clubs (bowling clubs, RSLs etc), and even nightclubs. The only proviso in a licensed venue is that for it to be a dance party it must be a non-regular event.

One of the more heavily advertised new regulations is the one relating to the provision of drinking water for all patrons. Here the Code is extremely progressive. It proposes that water must be supplied or be available free of charge at all events although it does not seem to apply directly to all nights at all licensed nightclubs and pubs as well. This means that even at an outdoor party in the middle-of-nowhere the promoter is expected, quite rightly, to supply adequate free drinking water to the patrons on the grounds of safety and harm minimisation. Hopefully the final Code will address the problem of nightclubs holding regular club nights (which are not covered by the definition of 'dance party') not being required by law to supply free COLD tap water rather than having bathrooms with warm or hot tap water. Maybe a 'dob-in-a-

nightclub' hotline could be established in keeping with the Government's keenness to establish 'dob-in' lines for nearly everything else.

What becomes clear after reading the entire Draft Code is that the Ministry For Police has written an extremely detailed and competent document. If applied to big commercial raves and dance parties, say those upward of 500 patrons with ticket prices greater than \$20 per person, it would do much to increase the safety and well-being of patrons, as well as remove much of the criminal element behind the 'dodgy promoters'. The major problem with the Draft Code is that it intends to apply to ALL parties whether they cost \$5 or \$50, and whether they draw 50 or 5000 people. The implementation of the regulations set down is not only extremely time-consuming (the Code itself suggests planning at least 60 days in advance) but also extremely expensive to implement for the promoter of small-scale events. Indeed it would be unlikely that events could be put on legitimately for less than \$20 per ticket under the Code.

By regulating the dance party/rave scene in this manner the large promoters will doubtless survive and profit under a climate of increased council and police co-operation. On the other hand their smaller-scale, amateur, 'underground' counterparts will have their parties closed-down and the promoters themselves will be left facing hefty fines and possible incarceration. What will happen to the music? As events cost more and more to hold because of the increased number of regulations to obey, promoters will turn to the more commercially accessible DJs and live acts in order to ensure that they draw enough crowd to meet their own costs. Innovative, cutting-edge music will be driven into the already hard-to-get 'club residencies' or into oblivion. It may come as a surprise to the Government and the economic rationalists that, within the close-knit 'underground' scenes promoters do not cut corners to make higher profits but simply to make their events affordable to their crowds. With no commitment to encouraging councils to provide low-cost venues to small-budget amateur promoters there will be no more Vibe Tribe-style events, no more Bunker parties, no more Virtual Bass-style events, no more Levelheadz under these proposed regulations.

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