

You know what I'm saying?"

You mean, instead of letting others decide for you?

'Yes. People are losing a feeling of responsibility for themselves. They think the city will take care of them in every way. Of course, it's good to feel safe with your government. But, where will it stop? Are they going to put fences around the canals because people will say, "You let me fall in the water." If I fall in the water, it's my own fault. I should not be able to complain to the city about that. But one person complaining can block the party time of hundreds of people.'

That's a good point. What happened to the idea of letting the majority decide?

'Well, we need someone who has a vision, who is willing to take risks. The people who govern our city now, their decisions are based mostly on fear: fear of people complaining, fear of noise violations, fear of lawsuits. But there's nothing to be afraid of. You know, in Groningen, they have no limits on drinking hours. The bars stay open all night. And there's no problem.' [See 'Goody goody Groningen' below.]

That's interesting. Why can't we do it here?

'That's something you're going to have to ask the politicians.'

A talking suit

After an awkward encounter with a humourless security guard, I am pinned with a dated *bezoeker* badge, and allowed into the electronically locked doors of Stadhuis Centrum. Upstairs, Rob van Binsbergen, an advisor to Mayor Job Cohen, is waiting.

He offers a warm handshake, a cup of coffee, and then goes straight into the talk: 'Closing hours have always been a political issue here. The last time we spoke of it was in 2004. We had a political debate. Traditionally, the VVD wants to abolish closing hours and [they] assume that public order will settle itself. The PvdA however, is more preventative. They're concerned with the balance of

'They keep calling it a creative city, using that as a marketing tool. But if you're a writer and at one a.m. you've just finished another chapter of your great book about life in Amsterdam, you're gonna want to go out and get a beer and tell people about it. Then you'll get your creative city.'



living, working and recreation—which is a delicate balance. They don't want to let any one culture grow bigger than the others.'

How do they know that extending bar hours would have that result? It seems to work well in Groningen.

'Some people look to Groningen, or to Utrecht. But others look to Tilburg, which also had twenty-four-hour drinking, but it didn't work. They went back. You can't compare the cities on equal terms.'

Right. The only way to know how it will work in Amsterdam is to try it in Amsterdam. So why don't we try it?

He smiles. 'That's the question: do we want to experiment or not? After the 2004 discussions, we granted late night cafés and discotheques additional day-time hours so that they could do more with their space, rather than only

incorporating night-time entertainment.'

Why aren't we trying to use later night-time hours?

'We feel that most of the bars will decide to stay open later, and most of the people that normally go home will stay out later. That will cause disorder in the streets. The Mayor says that the streets are his responsibility, and he does not want to put more police on the streets.'

But how do you know this will happen? Do you have someone specifically studying it for you?

'No, there is not an actual group that studies that for us. But did you follow what has happened in England? [See 'Across the water' below.]

Yes, violence and crime actually went down with the extra drinking hours—though, some say it had to do with the extra police force they added.

Now Van Binsbergen gets excited. 'See. That's *exactly* what the Mayor doesn't want: more police on the streets.'

Right.

'So, you have to find a balance between those who want to stay open later and the interests of the inhabitants.'

Sounds like PvdA. What about—

'The Mayor did make it possible—in some areas, like Leidseplein and Rembrandtplein—for pubs to stay open one hour later. We call it an *afkoel uurtje* ["cool-down hour"].'

Sounds great.

'In that hour, no new [alcoholic] drinks can be served, and no new people can be let in.'

That sucks.

'It's actually good for the public order outside. People can cool off for an hour inside. Then there's less tension.'

Could this be a step towards later hours?

'Well, I'm certain that the PvdA will say that it's the limit, and the VVD will say that it is only one step. We'll have another discussion in 2007 to see where we want to go next.'

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CASE 1: GOODY GOODY GRONINGEN

Groningen has allowed 24-hour liquor licenses for almost 15 years now. Talking to Eric Mooij, who specialises in horeca for the Groningen Gemeente, one gets the impression that all-night permits are as sensible as placing traffic signs by the road.

'Before we had [24-hour opening times], we noticed that there was a rush hour when all the bars closed. This created an extra effort for the police. Now, things are much more moderate. [For example], at 3 a.m. there is not suddenly 6,000 people on the streets. So we don't have to concern ourselves with crowd control.'

What about noise violations? Do you get many complaints from people living close to the bars?

'Not really. Everyone's used to it. Of course, like every city, there are always people who complain. But if you compare our relative numbers [of noise violations] with cities like Amsterdam or Rotterdam, there's not much difference. In fact, in places with [mandatory] closing times, the problems are usually bigger. Here, it's spread out over the night.'

How many bars/cafés does Groningen have? 'About 800.'

And how many stay open the entire night?

'The all-night bars are mostly in the centre. And there's about four or five of them.'

Why so few?

'Well, the thing is, there's all kinds of bars [with] different themes. They like to have different hours and cater to different kinds of people. After 4 a.m., you get the really die-hard drinkers, and a lot of business owners simply say, "I don't want to deal with them." So, it becomes a natural selection, and the entrepreneurs are free to choose. The advantage is, you know where the die-hard drinkers are going, so if you need to, you can control them more easily.'

CASE 2: ACROSS THE WATER

The case in England and Wales is a bit more extreme. During WWI, Parliament introduced the Defence of the Realm Act, which allowed no pub to serve alcohol past 9.30 p.m. The War ended, but the law remained pretty much intact for 90 years, and when it was modified, the limit was only extended to 11 p.m.

Then, in November 2005, the government brought in a new act that made it possible, in some cases, for pubs to stay open 24 hours. This was in the midst of extreme levels of alcohol-related violence and binge drinking. People were racing to beat the clock and flooding out onto the street—heavily intoxicated—at 11 p.m. It was hoped that the extra opening hours would calm the drinking public and slow them down. But not everyone agreed it would work—many even feared disaster.

'There was a great deal of controversy,' says Neil Williams, spokesperson for the British Beer & Pub Association in London. 'People were saying that [24-hour drinking] would contribute to public disorder. But the evidence has shown that this hasn't been the case. The only real noticeable change is that people tend to go out slightly later. And they don't drink as fast.'

Another concern was that every bar would suddenly become a 24-hour bar. 'That was another myth that was perpetrated,' says Williams. 'The reality—though all pubs could apply, most of them applied for only one or two extra hours, and then only for two nights of the week. For example, Friday and Saturday. There simply has not been a wholesale shift.'

Beyond that, the permits for extended hours are not easy to attain. For example, in Leeds, 2,400 establishments applied, but only 700 applications were granted. And in Central London, it's *still* difficult to find a late-night drink. A notable difference is that English and Welsh (Scotland has always had its own laws) city centres used to get crowded during drinking hours. But now, according to Williams, 'many people stay at their favourite local bar.'

Also important: the amount of alcohol-related violence actually dropped since the new laws. However, some people claim that this was a result of extra money being dumped into the police force. Williams acknowledges the extra policing, but, he says, 'that was in the heavy Christmas season. Since then, there haven't been substantial problems. When we had the World Cup, which of course is a very big event over here, there were no additional problems.'