

26/Mar/2003 The Scene (Luton News/Dunstable Gazette)

The Brian Heywood Column

Last chance to hear . . .

On Monday our MPs had their first opportunity to debate the Licensing Bill which - as it currently stands - would outlaw unlicensed live music. Up till now, all the action has been in the upper house, which has produced some thoughtful and reasoned debate, I expect that the Government will strongly resist the small events exemption won by opposition Peers on 11 March. This exemption would allow entertainment up to 11.30pm, no more than 250 attending at any one time. The Government's argument will be that the exemption 'would put children at risk and cause misery for local residents. It wholly ignores fire and safety and crime prevention. Just because there are fewer people doesn't mean there is less risk as there are fewer injuries and deaths.' [quote by spokeswoman for the Department for Culture, The Stage, 20 March 2003, p5].



Ominous stuff. But it doesn't explain, of course, how the risk of injury and death is addressed for crowds (children or adults) jumping up and down in front of big screen (or radio) broadcasts which are all totally exempt from the legislation. So a pub could install a powerful PA and pump out one of the 'blue' cable channels and no licence would be required under the new Licensing Bill for this. As I understand it, unaccompanied children will be allowed into pubs under the new law so they could be exposed to this adult material. Exotic dancing - like that found at certain pubs in the area - could be available to any age group, as long as it was on TV. However live music of any kind will be firmly regulated. As the man says, you couldn't make this stuff up.

All the other examples put forward by the Government in defence of licensing - trailing cables, or blocked fire exits - could lead to criminal prosecution under separate health and safety legislation. Both the recent music club tragedies in the USA would have been covered under the UK legislation - which may be why there have not been similar disasters in the UK. What is more, the police can close noisy or unruly pubs immediately for up to 24 hours. Local authorities can seize noisy equipment immediately, or serve anticipatory £20,000 noise abatement notices.

If you feel - like I do - that this new law is like using a sledge hammer to crack a nut - then let your MP know how you feel by faxing your MP now using the www.faxyourmp.com website which automatically identifies MPs from your post code. You can also still sign the on-line petition at www.petitiononline.com/2inabar/. Make your voice heard, it may be your last chance to save live music in pubs and other small venues.

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