

## **COMMITTEES**

### **Community Affairs Committee Report**

**Senator COLBECK** (Tasmania) (11.19 p.m.)—I thank the Senate for its indulgence in allowing me to finalise my comments on the *Ready-to-drink alcohol beverages* report that was handed down today by the Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs. I will not hold the Senate too long. I just want to take the opportunity to finalise some comments that I was making. When my time expired this afternoon, I was making the point that the very narrow focus of the measure to increase tax on RTDs was not going to address the problem that the government has claimed that it would do.

I would like to go to the evidence was provided in submissions. It would be fair to say that the public health groups that addressed the Senate committee welcomed the measure, but it was a qualified welcome, in that they saw any measure that needed to be taken had to be done with a comprehensive approach. I mentioned that in my comments earlier in the day. It had to include a range of measures. The concern was that this measure was too narrow and did not take into account, in particular, issues in respect of substitution.

There is no question that all of those that provided evidence saw the requirement to take a comprehensive approach to dealing with the issues that the community faces with respect to alcohol. They included issues of education, issues of law and order, issues relating to the community and, particularly and importantly, issues to do with supporting families. There is a lot of research to demonstrate that the greatest influence on young people and their alcohol use is the family. I think it is quite fair to be critical of the government, especially at this point of time, for the fact that they have not addressed one particular measure towards that. I congratulate the DrinkWise program that was launched last week and looks at the intergenerational aspects of alcohol. In my mind, that is one of the real issues that needs to be addressed.

The public health lobby, also as part of their submission, called for a volumetric tax on alcohol, as did some other groups within the alcohol sector. The wine industry and some elements of the brewing industry were not keen on that volumetric tax. The Alcohol Education and Rehabilitation Foundation tabled an example of how a volumetric tax might work. The call for a volumetric tax was pretty common across all of the public health groups that addressed the committee. The impact of a volumetric tax would effectively return tax on RTDs of 1.5 standard drinks to an equivalent tax of a stubbie of beer that has 1.5 standard drinks—in other words, it would reverse the measure that the government has put into place.

That particular evidence from those groups demonstrates a real flaw in the logic and argument put forward by this government since announcing what they claimed was a health measure—the announcement of an increased excise on RTDs. On the evidence both through estimates and through the inquiry process Treasury took no account of substitution, when there is clear evidence that substitution occurs in a number of countries, and the Liberal senators' report provides a graph of a substitution that occurred in Germany. We are not saying that is exactly what is going to happen, because we acknowledge that we cannot say that. We accept that each jurisdiction is different. The evidence is still to come in with respect to that. We understand that, but it is quite clear from the anecdotal evidence, and I think from the earlier evidence from the industry, that there will be substitution.

As I said earlier, young people are not silly. If they want to go out and have a skinful—if that is the way you want to put it—if they want to go out and get drunk, they know how to do it. That is one of the issues that this measure has not addressed. There was also no consultation with the health department. As Treasury said, we had all the data that we needed by talking to Customs and the ATO, so we did not talk to the health department. While the government calls this a health measure, from our perspective, it seriously can only be regarded as a health measure. It raises \$3.1 billion in tax. There are no allocations towards the other measures that all parties believe are critical in addressing in this issue; it is just a reallocation of Department of Health and Ageing funding of \$53 million within the budget.

This measure does nothing to address the underlying issue: the culture that seems to exist among young people these days, which is to write yourself off or get yourself drunk. Unfortunately, just changing the tax regime on one narrow band of alcohol does nothing to address those issues. If it were that simple, it would be fantastic. But the evidence is quite clear that it is not. It does nothing to address the risk-taking behaviour that underlies many of the problems that we are seeing. That was clearly demonstrated by the report shown on the ABC's *Four Corners* a couple of weeks ago, where the young people in that report were clearly out to get drunk. As disappointing and as frightening as that might be for many of us in the community and for parents, that is the reality.

The Liberal members of the committee believe sincerely that, while there is certainly an issue to be dealt with in respect to the abuse of alcohol, there is no question that this narrow approach is not going to deal with the problem. Unless the government has a much more comprehensive approach to dealing with this, we obviously cannot see our way to supporting it. We are concerned that there is quite a disturbing pattern developing here. The government has this process of setting up programs and reviews to deal with issues and then makes decisions completely outside those programs. There is the Ken Henry tax review to deal with taxation across the board and to which taxation of alcohol has now been referred, and the COAG process to deal with alcohol abuse. Here we have one narrow, finite decision that is made outside any of those processes. The government has talked about taking an evidence based approach, but there is no evidence that they are actually doing that. In fact, the evidence is that they are not. It is interesting to note the approach of both the Democrats and the Greens, who have also criticised the fact that this one individual measure is not going to work on its own and needs to be a part of an overall process. I thank the Senate for its indulgence with respect to allowing me to speak tonight.