

COMMITTEES

Community Affairs Committee Report

Senator MOORE (Queensland) (4.48 p.m.)—I present the report of the Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs, *Ready-to-drink alcohol beverages*, together with the *Hansard* record of proceedings and documents presented to the committee.

In speaking to this report, I want to particularly put on record my thanks to the other members of the committee, to the people who provided evidence and witness statements to our committee and most particularly to the secretariat of our committee because of the ridiculous time frame that was presented to our committee to present this report. This is a particularly complex issue. On that, the whole committee was agreed—there was no doubt about the process. However, we were presented with a time frame which meant that we needed to present this document today. I think that caused a degree of stress on all those who were engaged in the process, because we think this is an important issue. I think we would require more time to fully consider the range of the terms of reference with which we were provided. However, the terms of reference came down, in part, to whether the government's decision to impose a higher tax on ready-to-drink beverages was an appropriate thing to do at the time. Other terms of reference looked at much wider issues of alcohol in our society. I do not think in the time given to us we were able to fully contemplate those other terms of reference.

In terms of the importance of the increased taxation on ready-to-drinks, the majority report has come down in favour of the government's decision, unsurprisingly. We say that the government's decision, which has been clearly enunciated by Minister Roxon and the Prime Minister, who has taken a personal interest in these issues, has been an important step in the ongoing consideration of the issues of alcohol, particularly with young people in our community. No-one denies that there is a problem. In the process of the committee we were absolutely drowned with data, graphs and statistics. However, there was one key issue: regardless of what the data and the statistics said about trends or processes, there is a problem—there is no doubt about that. We heard evidence from a range of people who work in the public health area, we heard evidence from people who have been studying this issue for many years and there is a consensus that there is a problem with alcohol, particularly with young people in our community.

Pleasingly, this issue has been taken up in the media. For a long time, it seemed like it was a sleeping issue and only appeared from time to time. But over the last few months there has been increasing coverage of these issues in the media. Partly in response to what is going on, which includes the horrific programs and data that have come to the committee's attention, the government has decided that amongst a range of other issues—and it is important to absolutely concentrate on this point—there is no single response. Certainly the taxation issue and cost issue are but one response. But they are an important response. That has been borne out by information that we have received from other countries and by talking with young people about what they are doing with alcohol in their communities. This alone will not solve the issue—that certainly came out consistently. We refer throughout the report to the COAG process because this has been an issue on the agenda of COAG, which is looking at this issue across the country.

I think the term 'binge-drinking' has been overused and I know that in the last couple of weeks there has been a move away, particularly in the national health and medical research area, from the term 'binge-drinking'. What we are talking about is use of alcohol to a risky level. That is a very important concept to keep before all of us. We need to consider the way people in our community view alcohol. We are not saying that people should not drink. I want to put that clearly on the open agenda. This is not a prohibitionist response to the issue of alcohol. What we are talking about is people working together to come up with solutions to the levels of violence, harm and misuse that have been identified in the community. There has been a response from all levels of government, from people who are working in the medical profession and from people who are researching in the public health area, and one solution amidst all of those actions will be the increase in cost for ready-to-drink alcohol beverages.

We know—and, again, I do not think there is any particular question about this either—that some of the ready-to-drink beverages mask the taste of alcohol and, as such, are more attractive to young people. The committee heard evidence that people were not even aware of how many drinks they were consuming or whether in fact they were alcoholic. We have limited data on underage drinking, and an area that must be considered more fully into the future is the way we collect data. Certainly, one of the key issues for our committee was the introductory phase—when people begin their journey with alcohol. Doing that in a way that is responsible and safe sets people up for better and more responsible use of alcohol throughout their lives. But if young people are caught up in irresponsible drinking at a young age, that is a recipe for future health issues. It is also a recipe for getting people into situations which are clearly unsafe.

This discussion will go on; this is not the end of the debate. However, we on this side of the Senate strongly believe that an important step has been taken in this taxation response. It is only one part of a wider need, but it is a start and it should not be delayed or dismissed for political purposes or because of arguments about whether it in itself is enough. It is not; it is a step in the right direction.