

COMMITTEES

Community Affairs Committee Report

Senator SIEWERT (Western Australia) (5.09 p.m.)—The Greens tabled additional comments to the Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs report entitled *Ready-to-drink alcohol beverages*. We have expressed for quite some time our concern about alcohol and alcohol abuse in our community. We consider that it is a waste of time arguing about whether or not some drinking rates have gone up. The fact is that we have a \$15 billion plus problem in this country that we need to start dealing with. As I have just said, it is a waste of time arguing about how much risky drinking has increased or decreased. However, very fortuitously during the inquiry, a report by Michael Livingston was published in the *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*. The report showed very clearly that instances of alcohol related harm had definitely gone up. It also pointed out that it is very difficult to measure risky drinking behaviour because many of the groups that display this behaviour are hard to survey. But the fact is that alcohol related harm has gone up in this country, and the statistics clearly show that.

While the inquiry focused on ready-to-drink alcohol for a specific reason, it is important to note that the Greens very strongly believe that a comprehensive strategy is needed to deal with this issue. While RTDs, or ready-to-drinks, are a particular issue, they need a comprehensive strategy to deal with them. One of the reasons that RTDs are a particular focus is that there has been a shift towards drinking those types of alcoholic beverages. Anecdotal evidence and, I think, increasingly research evidence shows that RTDs are a focus because they encourage young people to drink. The milk and sweetness in RTDs cover the flavour of the alcohol. I will just diverge here to point out that, during the inquiry, an industry person who was questioned about this said that they did not add sugar to RTDs because there is cola in them. If you look at the make-up of cola, you will see that it contains a great deal of sugar; hence, you do not need to add sugar because the cola adds the sugar. The fact is that these drinks are sweet and attractive to young people. The theory being put forward is that these beverages are encouraging young people to drink because, when you are young, your body rejects the taste of alcohol, whereas milk, sugar and cola mask the taste of the alcohol.

As the opposition pointed out, the government's proposed changes to the alcohol excise regime will raise a substantive amount of income. If the government is genuine in saying that that measure is part of a strategy to address alcohol abuse and harm in this country, it needs to be hypothecating a great deal of that money to effective public education and social marketing programs.

The committee heard some very strong evidence on what is needed for a comprehensive strategy to address this issue, and people who work in this area have established a bit of a hierarchy on how to do that. It starts with regulating price. Experts consider that using price as a mechanism with RTDs should be part of the strategy. Other mechanisms include lowering speed limits for all drivers, enforcing liquor-licensing laws, limiting availability of alcohol, restricting hours of alcohol sales, limiting the density of alcohol outlets, community mobilisation, workplace interventions, curbing alcohol sponsorship in sport, and social marketing. These are the areas that experts say should be part of a comprehensive strategy.

The Greens have made our policy on advertising quite clear. We believe that there should be a ban on alcohol advertising. We believe that there should be a ban on the advertising of alcohol through sports sponsorships and promotional activities. We have had two inquiries into alcohol in the past month, and the issue of advertising to young people and what appeals to them was raised. When the free-to-air television people were asked about the percentage of young people watching sport, they said it was only 3.7 per cent. If you look at the percentage of young people in our population—guess what?—it is around 3.7 per cent. In other words, advertising is actually getting to a large percentage of the population's young people.

In our additional comments to the report, the Greens have listed 10 recommendations. We begin with support for well-resourced and targeted, evidence based public education and social marketing campaigns that are focused particularly on at-risk groups. Then we look at inquiring into a volumetric tax. Very strong evidence was presented to the committee about the usefulness of a volumetric tax. However, I probably differ from some of my opposition colleagues on this issue. The nature of drinks like RTDs that appeal particularly to young people and to at-risk groups need to be looked at, because a volumetric price signal will not work with RTDs, although the evidence clearly shows that price does work as a limiting factor.

There was evidence from overseas presented to the committee about the usefulness of price signals. There was some evidence presented to the committee that clearly showed that in some countries in Europe substitution had not occurred, that in fact it was working as part of a comprehensive approach. So the Greens are urging the government, and we have put on record, that along with this initiative on RTDs they need to be presenting a comprehensive strategy but also need to be allocating significant resources to an evidence based—that is very important—public education and social marketing campaign.