

SUBMISSION TO SENATE STANDING COMMITTEE ON COMMUNITY AFFAIRS,
PARLIAMENT OF AUSTRALIA

Concerning the ALCOHOL TOLL REDUCTION BILL 2007 (Senator S. Fielding.)

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“A FENCE AT THE TOP”

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INTENTION It is the contention of this submission to show that there is at this time a damaging widespread culture of alcoholic intoxication among the Australian community, especially, but not only, among 15 to 35 year olds: and that the single most effective measure to begin a much needed reversal of this culture would be the cessation of the advertising of alcoholic drinks on television including pay TV, signage and product placement.

IS THERE A CULTURE OF INTOXICATION?

Very much could be submitted to argue that there is such a culture, I submit the following. Firstly there is an agreed “Yes” between those who produce alcohol and promote its sale and use, and those who seek to mitigate the harmful effects of its misuse. On the SBS “INSIGHT” program of 15/5/07 there was agreement between representatives of the Australian Hotels Association and the Distilled Spirits Council with representatives of mitigation agencies, medical and surgical experts, sociologists, psychologists, researchers in the field and many others that there was indeed such a culture and that it needed remedying. There was also this agreement across a similar wide spectrum of opinion on the ABC program “A Difference of Opinion” of 6/9/07.

Secondly, a report released on May 21 2007 by the Australian National Council on Drugs states that one in eight Australian children under the age of 12 lives with a parent that abuses alcohol or illicit drugs. That is 230,000 children live with at least one parent that binge drinks, 40,000 with a parent that uses cannabis daily and 14,000 that use methamphetamine once a month. This is 13% for all children under 12 (“only “10% for Britain, US and Canada). (1). I quote these figures at this point not so much to highlight risk from alcohol misuse but to emphasise its extent.

Thirdly, The Alcohol and Drug Rehabilitation Foundation reported a survey of 1000 people that indicated that over the recent Christmas and New Year holidays 2.4 million people were scared by or physically or verbally abused by someone who was drunk. This is an enormous number. 30% of 14 to 17 year olds said they feared for their family and friends when in the presence of inebriated people. 10% of respondents aged 14 to 24 admitted becoming abusive while drinking. Spokesman Mr. Daryl Smeaton said most weekends saw these types of problems, not just the holiday season and that the most common flashpoints were late-closing pubs in the hearts of towns and cities (2).

Fourthly here are two recent examples from correspondents to the Sydney Morning Herald of this culture of intoxication in action.

“I always spend Australia Day at a tiny South Coast town....the Australia I love....white sand, clearwater, no-nonsense people. Over the last few years.... its beaches (have) been taken over by armies of ugly Aussies....with enormous flags and even more enormous eskies. From dawn until the next dawn they drink. They drink while aimlessly driving around the streets. They drink from wine bladders while swimming. They drink while playing cricket and footie. They sit on eskies in the middle of the road and drink. Their war cry starts in the morning and builds to a fever pitch by mid-afternoon (with) endless repetitions of the vowel sound oi interspersed with gratuitous sexualised insults shouted randomly at passing women. Australia Day.... I have come to hate it.” (SMH 30/1/08).

“A foreign visitor to Tamworth country music festival could be excused for thinking (it) was..... Bundaberg Rum Day. The dominance of this beverage over the branding, publicity and focus..... was sickening. My wife was unable to leave my side after about 10pm.....because the moment she did, hordes of Bundy-ed-up idiots would grope, grab and leer at her. We saw groups of louts pouring it on themselves, skulling cans and proudly stacking hundreds of empties into shrines to Bundy..... A bumper sticker summed it up for me: “Bundy made me do it”. I wonder if that will be the defence in court for the violence, sexual harassment and assaults that people fuelled on this stuff commit?” (SMH 1/2/08).

170,000 teenagers have been binge drinking in the last week, (1 in 10), (ABC News 702 Sydney 7.45am and 7.00pm 25/2 08.) Here again is a large number for us to grapple with. The fact that this culture of intoxication has existed for a very long time and can be traced back to 18th century England explains much but does not make it right.

THE EXTENT OF THE DAMAGE

Again it is necessary to be selective. First some hospital experiences and then some across the board figures.

On New Years Day (2007) St Vincents Hospital Sydney found 60% of its 190 emergency admissions to be alcohol related. Most were young people who had been binge drinking including 30 head injuries, 23 falls, broken bones and vomiting. Many were at risk of alcohol toxicity and /or vomiting with fatal inhalation. Blackouts and loss of ability to self care are also problems. Sydney Hospital reported 105 cases, 30% were for intoxication alone, the young women were unable to stand having vomited on their clothes, the men mostly had violence related injuries, the youngest patient was 14, most were under 25. (3). Say 50 alcohol patients across the land at 50 major hospitals – 2500 for just one night of the year, admittedly the worst.

4,000 people die yearly related to alcohol misuse. 50 of these are teenagers related to acute alcohol abuse. (4). The extended family trauma for many is obvious. The death rate from illicit drugs, by comparison is calculated as 400 a year. Police callouts are up to 60% alcohol related. 30% of motor vehicle accidents are alcohol related as are 46% of homicides and deaths by fighting in males and 32% in females. (5).

The misuse of alcohol is very often the precursor of the sexual abuse and degradation of women. The havoc caused in indigenous communities is well known. Inappropriate behaviour in the bonding of peer groups is another problem area e.g/. footballers, defence personnel, teenagers, student and college groups. The foetal alcohol syndrome remains as devastating as ever, fortunately fairly uncommon.

With a background of 83% of the population now drinkers in 2004, as compared to 72% in 1993 (6), and 30.5% of males and 25% of females in their twenties drinking at high and risky levels at least once a month (7) and in 2001 85% of alcohol consumed by 14 to 17 year olds was at high and risky levels (8), the above findings are no surprise, with advertising contributing.

LONG TERM MORBIDITY

Figures given in the Australian Alcohol Strategy 2006-2009 show that an estimated 459,000 Australians consume alcohol at levels considered to be at high risk for their long term health. 41,000 a year register for alcohol related treatment. There are 35,000 prescriptions written each year for drugs for alcohol dependence (9). Over the period 1993/94 to 2000/01 there were according to one estimate the following hospital admissions for alcohol related reasons: Alcoholic liver disease 25,000; Alcohol dependence 88,000, Cardiovascular disease 5000; Cancer 12,000, Other chronic medical conditions 43,000 (10). This is a total of 173,000 over an 8 year period giving 21,600 admissions per year for long term alcohol morbidity. With thousands more acute emergency treatments the burden on health resources is very large.

WHAT WOULD THE CESSATION OF ALCOHOL ADVERTISING ON TV ACHIEVE?

It would promote high profile community awareness of a serious public health problem needing serious attention.

It would be a significant factor in reducing the promotion and therefore misuse of alcohol. It would send a positive message that the use of alcohol requires mature and thoughtful consideration. This would help parents struggling to introduce their children to responsible alcohol use.

It would take account of the Australian Hotels Association's claim that 60% of alcohol consumption is off licensed premises (11) including under age drinking, which the Association claims, rightly, is primarily a parental responsibility. So a strong message is needed in the community to support this vulnerable population achieve a correct attitude to alcohol.

It would replace the alcohol industry's totally ineffective self regulated code of TV advertising that very often does not keep separate alcohol use from personal, business, social, sporting, sexual or other success as it is supposed to do.

The cost would be very small, it would be an enormously cost effective public health measure.

A complete cessation would be much more arresting in bringing home to the community all the above and not leave the open window after 9.00pm when so many sporting events are still in full swing e.g. one day cricket, night football, Aust. Open tennis, Olympics, all the overnight football from Europe, Grand Prix, etc.etc.. Thousands and thousands of even young children are watching after 9.00pm and it is almost certain that the alcohol industry would target this open window with an inundation of advertising. Importantly, there will be no conflicting messages with the Government's just announced, and very welcome, plans to mount an extensive advertising campaign on TV to warn of the dangers of alcohol misuse.

Finally it cannot be argued that it is not right to prevent the advertising of a legal substance for this has already been done with tobacco. There is no inherent right to advertise, as say there are inherent human rights that apply to the person. Advertisers are given their rights by law and they can have them removed by law.

CONCLUSION

The cessation of alcohol advertising on TV, including pay TV, signage and product placement will be a tremendously significant public health achievement that will be an excellent beginning, at very little cost, to reversing our culture of intoxication that is wreaking so much harm amongst us at present. Some sort of fencing at the top of the cliff must lessen the number of ambulances needed at the bottom. Of course, all present and planned interventions must be continued and more developed as appropriate. Old style prohibition, USA, is not appropriate.

ALSO

I also support strongly the other aims of the Alcohol Reduction Bill 2007-requiring health information labels on all alcohol products, requiring all alcohol advertisements to be pre-approved by a government body (as described in the Bill), banning all other alcohol advertisements which are aimed at children or which link drinking to personal, business, social, sporting, sexual or other success.

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13/03/2008

NOTES

- (1) Sydney Morning Herald 21/5 2007
- (2) Sydney Morning Herald 6/2/2008
- (3) Sydney Morning Herald 13-14/1/2007
- (4) Sydney Morning Herald 10/9/2007
- (5) Sydney Morning Herald 24/9/2007
- (6) National Alcohol Strategy 2006-2009, page 21, (Source : Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2005) , www.alcohol.gov.au
- (7) National Alcohol Strategy 2006-2009, page 9, (Source:Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2005), www.alcohol.gov.au
- (8) National Alcohol Strategy 2006-2009, page 9, (Source: Chikritzhs et al 2003), www.alcohol.gov.au
- (9) National Alcohol Strategy 2006-2009, page 24,(Source: AIHW 2005, AIHW 2005c, HIC 2005), www.alcohol.gov.au
- (10) National Alcohol Strategy 2006-2009, page 22, (Source: Chikritzhs et al 2003}, www.alcohol.gov.au
- (11) A BC 702 Sydney, "A Difference of Opinion" 6/9/2007.