

From

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Dear Secretary and members of the Community Affairs Committee,

"Alcohol [Toll Reduction] Bill 2007"

Introduction.

The following submission is counter-signed both by myself as Convener of the national committee of the Presbyterian Church of Australia, charged with the responsibility of investigating and then advocating the Church's considered opinion on matters of social concern such as are addressed in Senator Fielding's proposed legislation and the current leader of our Federal Assembly who practically functions as our public spokesman as he carries out his official duties as representative of the denomination.

Summary of Submission Argument.

This submission unequivocally supports the legislation proposed by Senator Fielding as a means of addressing the harm done by the misuse of alcohol within our society.

The Presbyterian Church of Australia has always opposed the abuse of alcohol and has become increasingly concerned about the alarming rise in the misuse of drugs of all kinds, including alcohol, for a long time.

Some within the denomination advocate total abstinence from all alcohol but all would passionately agree that there is a need to address the obvious excessive indulgence of alcohol as manifested in "binge drinking" in particular, together with the underlying cultural glorification of drunkenness in general.

Comment On The Legislation's Proposals.

1. The Display of Health Warnings.

The proposal to prominently display health warnings on alcoholic beverage containers is to be supported as a method of re-enforcing a greater awareness of the possible harmful effects of a product akin to those found on cigarette packaging.

There will always be some who would argue that familiarity with such warnings breeds apathy, but we are persuaded that labelling is a responsible thing to do and note that even marketers have expressed no real opposition to such proposals – while doubting their effectiveness.

The Prime Minister is to be congratulated in his honest aspiration to "scare the living daylights" out of teenagers (and hopefully some others as well) with regard to the dangers of drinking in general and binge drinking in particular.

2. Limitation and Regulation of Alcohol advertising.

The limitation of times within which alcohol is able to be advertised may seem arbitrary to some. However, it reflects the legislation's conviction that there is now an intemperance in

the amount of alcohol being consumed by Australians: in and of itself this measure will not be a cure-all for the problems we face as a nation in relation to alcohol.

It is our view that if this legislative proposal is enacted, there should be an overall reduction in the total advertising of alcohol not simply laws which allow an intensified barrage of alcohol ads after 9 PM.

Perhaps amendments of A.C.M.A. regulations will need to be considered and vigorous advocacy with FreeTV Australia may need to take place?

We believe that a tighter regulation of alcohol advertising to prevent both an inappropriate "message" being promoted (which the Bill describes well) and the instances of misleading portrayal by adult actors playing teens, must be a good "first step" towards demythologising the benefits of alcohol's excessive use.

However, as all would agree, including Senator Fielding, the "Toll Reduction" Bill is only a beginning.

We are delighted at the Prime Minister's very practically-targeted announcement of the funding of an ad-campaign aimed to "scare" teenagers out of abusing alcohol!

His initiative in enlisting the co-operation of the sporting community is to be applauded as sports 'heroes' are significant role-models for people of all ages.

C.O.A.G. Co-operation.

This submission recognises that much of the responsibility for the proper regulation of alcohol belongs to the States' jurisdiction.

We submit that several significant initiatives will be essential to help promote the curtailment of the excessive use of and reliance on alcohol and that a climate of co-operative Federalism through C.O.A.G. will be needed to assist in the furthering of this process.

Topics to be addressed through C.O.A.G. should include (in no particular order of importance):

- the possible limitation of the display of advertising signage at sports events – not necessarily their banning but their prominence.
- the restriction on the hours in which alcohol can be traded whether in licensed premises or anywhere.
- The tighter regulation of the sale of so-called "alcopop" drinks, especially the image presented to those under-adult drinking age.

Conclusion.

This submission reflects our Church's long-held opposition to the abuse of alcohol which it regards as a social evil that is the cause of much of the marriage breakdown, violence and tragedy in our society.

We do not advocate total abstinence [prohibition] but wish to wholeheartedly support this proposed legislation as it aims to begin a process that will minimise the appalling cost which the abuse of alcohol brings both to the individual indulger and those with whom they have contact.

We ask your committee to recommend the Bill's adoption by the Parliament and implementation throughout the Commonwealth.

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