

# How long until our pubs have no beer?

Federal and state anti-alcohol policies are unlikely to be effective, argues **Hugh Tobin**

**A**ustralians are consuming the same amount of alcohol per person as they were 20 years ago. Nevertheless, we are suddenly being told by the federal government that the country is in the grip of a binge drinking 'epidemic'.

In March Kevin Rudd launched the National Binge Drinking Strategy aimed at reducing alcohol related problems among young Australians. \$53.5 million was allocated over four years for education and community initiatives which particularly target sporting organisations.

New laws and regulations are being rushed through by federal and state parliaments many of which are token symbolism, and the majority do nothing more than place unnecessary Nanny State burdens on the majority of Australians who enjoy drinking alcohol responsibly.

State governments across the country are trialling and implementing lockouts which dramatically reduce the freedom to enter and exit licenced premises. Consumer Affairs Victoria has implemented a freeze on issuing new late night alcohol licences. State and federal health minister have proposed mandating graphic warnings on all alcohol labels.

There have been numerous calls across the country to restrict how people order their drinks and restrict drink promotions in bars that are said to encourage excessive consumption. A Senate inquiry is investigating banning alcohol advertising before 9pm on television and radio. Family First Senator Steve Fielding has proposed extending NSW laws which target

adults who supply alcohol to visiting children in their home. And the Rudd government has not ruled out raising the legal drinking age above 18.

Drinkers risk falling into the legislative twilight zone occupied by smokers—their activity remains technically legal, but is also a plaything for politicians and regulators who want to appear tough on public health.

But the strategies currently being implemented or proposed are unlikely to achieve the ambitious aims that have been set.

Certainly, alcohol fueled violence and alcohol-related health problems are a major problem, but they are bound together with a larger cultural problem, particularly associated with young males who feel the need to intoxicate themselves with anything they can: from alcohol, to large doses of caffeine, ecstasy, or prescription drugs.

The federal government's 70 per cent excise tax increase on alcopops—small bottles of ready to drink, pre-mixed spirits—was justified on the basis that the number of young girls consuming pre-mixed drinks has increased from 14 to 60 per cent since 2000. But this is only half the story. Overall, teenage girls are not drinking any more than in the past. According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare high-risk binge drinking by people aged 14 to 19 has fallen from 10.7 per cent in 2001 to 9.1 per cent in 2007. Alcohol consumption by Australians 15 years and older has remained stable at about 10 litres per person per year. Furthermore, the AIHW points out that it is not possible to match the increase in alcopop consumption over the last

decade to any consumption patterns in specific demographic groups. A submission to the Senate Inquiry following the alcopops excise increase by Independent Distillers Australia points out that contrary to popular belief, there are more alcopops consumed by males than females. And the majority of alcopops consumed are not the stereotypical 'girly' light spirit drinks like pre-mixed vodka and raspberry soda, but dark spirits such as bourbon and cola.

Nevertheless, a 1.6 per cent drop in teenage high-risk drinking is not indicative of a crisis situation. And as the AIHW has revealed, there is little indication that the increasing prevalence and popularity of alcopops over the last decade has contributed to any increase in risky behavior.

International experience with raising the tax on alcopops does not inspire confidence that doing so will have a marked effect on health. When the British and German governments targeted alcopops, most consumers quickly changed their drinking preferences to lower-taxed beer, cider and wine. Other consumers replaced their alcopops consumption with spirits.

And in Australia, early indications appear that since the tax was increased, consumers have been substituting with straight spirits. *The Australian* reported in June that alcopop sales dropped by almost 40 per cent in the first month after the increase, but spirit sales increased by 20 per cent. Given that consumers of straight spirits are likely to be less informed about the quantity of alcohol they consume in any one drink—young teenage girls who carefully measure their vodka into shot glasses are surely in the minority—these initial figures imply that the govern-

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Institute of Public Affairs Trade and IP Unit Director Tim Wilson (with megaphone) joins protesters opposing Melbourne's new 2am lockout policy, which came into effect on June 3 this year. The 2am lockout is a controversial three-month trial by the Brumby government that prevents entry into pubs, bars and nightclubs in certain 'hot-spots' between 2am and 7am. Patrons already inside venues can remain but cannot re-enter the premises if they leave. John Woudstra courtesy of Fairfax Photos

ment's alcopop tax may be making the binge drinking problem worse.

If the government's alcopop tax increase was part of a broad measure to harmonise the excise level on all alcoholic beverages this would be a separate matter. It doesn't make much sense to have different alcoholic products taxed at different rates. For example, while the excise hike increases the tax on alcopops to the same level as the tax on straight spirits, it does not bridge the remarkable gap between spirits and beer or wine. While alcopops and spirits are now taxed at just over 80 cents per standard drink, the tax on a standard drink of cask wine is just 5 cents.

If the government feels it needs to impose a special sin tax on alcoholic products on top of the GST, then that

tax should be uniform. Alcohol is just as much a 'sin' no matter what form it is consumed in. That the excise rate across alcoholic products varies so much reflects nothing more than political desire to encourage the wine and beer industry. It is hard not to be cynical that this year's excise increase seems to have had far more to do with maintaining the surplus in the federal budget than any coherent 'binge-drinking' strategy.

Under-age drinking is already illegal, as is drink-driving, drunken violence and drunk and disorderly conduct. The introduction of lockouts and curfews to combat violence on the streets is a sign that police resources are under strain. In Melbourne, the same weekend that the 2am lockout was im-

plemented, the Victorian Police Association claimed that there was a major shortage of police officers available for patrol work, particularly at night.

It is often speculated that the first European settlers in Australia drank more alcohol per head of population than any other community in the history of mankind. Alcohol will always be a part of Australian culture. And an overwhelming majority of Australians consume alcohol responsibly and want to continue to be able to do so. The majority do not deserve to be punished for the violent crimes of the few. But they should be protected from them, and that protection will come from more effective policing, not from knee-jerk policy decisions.

