

Alcohol Toll Reduction Bill 2007

Minority Report by the Australian Greens

Senator Rachel Siewert

The Australian Greens are concerned by the consistently high levels of alcohol-related harm experienced in Australia over the last two decades. This is not the sudden crisis some would have us believe. It has been an issue of great concern for decades that imposes significant costs upon the whole of the community. In 2005 the estimated cost was \$15.2 billion, while the estimated revenue was \$5 billion.

We note the evidence to the committee that the real rapid growth in risky drinking occurred predominantly during the 1980's, and that rates of alcohol consumption and risky drinking behaviour have remained at high and relatively stable levels since then.

The Australian Greens are disappointed that this report did not go further in its findings and recommendations given the strength and breadth of the evidence presented. We note that similar evidence of the costs and impacts of problem drinking, and of the need for a comprehensive and integrated approach to tackling these issues is also being presented to another ongoing Senate inquiry.

We agree with the committee report that the measures proposed within the Alcohol Toll Reduction Bill are flawed and do not constitute an approach which is either comprehensive enough or has been sufficiently thought through to prove an effective remedy to reducing the incidence of alcohol-related harm, particularly for young Australians.

The Australian Greens support the intention of this Bill to close the loophole that allows alcohol advertising during live daytime sports telecasts. We agree that this clearly contradicts the logic and the intent of the restrictions on advertising alcohol to children as contained within the code and there is no justification for this loophole. However, we also note the evidence on the viewing patterns of 14-19 year olds suggests that merely restricting television alcohol advertising until after 9pm at night (and failing to address pay TV) will do little to reduce their exposure to these ads and more comprehensive advertising and sponsorship bans are clearly needed.

There has been a consistent theme throughout the evidence presented to this inquiry that an integrated and sustained national campaign similar in the scale and longevity to previous Australia-wide campaigns addressing the harms caused by tobacco is required to change our drunken culture and reduce the level of alcohol-

related harm and violence, especially among the young and those at greatest risk of harm.

The measures proposed within the Alcohol Toll Reduction Bill demonstrate the limitations of a populist approach to addressing one aspect of a complex problem, and would be unlikely to have any significant impact on problem drinking should they be implemented in their current form. Even if the government were to take up the intent of these recommendations and put forward amendments to correct their legislative failings, these measures would still be unlikely to have any impact of consequence in isolation.

The Australian Greens do not agree with recommendation 3 of committee report, to the extent that it suggests that the current approach being taken by the Commonwealth Government through its National Binge Drinking Strategy and the initiatives of Ministerial Councils on alcohol advertising and health warnings constitute a sufficiently comprehensive strategy.

In particular, the activities of the Monitoring of Alcohol Advertising Committee as directed by the Ministerial Council on Drug Strategy are merely to monitor alcohol advertising and the current regulatory system. This is clearly insufficient as there was substantial evidence presented to the committee that the current system of industry self regulation is not working, despite several reviews and promises of reform. The evidence from the research undertaken by Professor Sandra Jones is particularly compelling on this point.

We believe that there is already sufficient evidence on which to act, and the high levels of alcohol-related harm mean that we should act quickly and comprehensively. We also note in passing the failure of the previous government to act on this pressing issue during its eleven years in office.

In light of a decade of evidence that attempts to reform the process of self-regulation have made little difference to the preponderance of inappropriate advertising of alcohol, we believe that as a minimum course of action the Government should move to enforceable regulation of alcohol advertising, sponsorship and promotions, not simply to recommend more monitoring.

The Australian Greens believe that the most appropriate course on action is to ban alcohol advertising, sponsorship and promotions altogether – as part of a wider, well-resourced and sustained community education campaign and harm minimisation strategy.

In relation to the issue of health warning labels, there was substantive evidence to the committee that, for labelling to be effective, it needs to be well targeted and

designed and to work as part of a comprehensive public education strategy. Australia has an excellent international record in this regard in relation to reducing tobacco-related harm and in tackling drink-driving. The evidence is clear that a long-term, sustained, well-resourced evidence-based campaign is required to make a real difference.

We remain concerned that the evidence from FSANZ suggests that there will be substantial delays before a new food standard for alcohol is developed, and it is not at all clear whether the approach they will take will deliver the kind of labelling standards required. A number of witnesses, including VicHealth, AER, DrinkWise Australia & Professor Jones presented evidence of the kind of labelling required ... and pointed out the limitations of data derived from studies of small, low quality labels not supported by a wider education campaign. An effective labelling strategy is one where the information and images on the label seeks to remind and reinforce drinkers of the well-targeted messages they have already been exposed to through a wider community education campaign.

The Australian Greens are also concerned by the limitations of an approach which is based on treating and labelling alcohol as a food rather than as a drug of addiction, and believe that a more effective approach to alcohol labelling would be based on the approach taken to tobacco under the consumer protection provisions of the Trade Practices Act.

The Australian Greens consider that the introduction of the National Alcohol Strategy 2006-2009 by the Ministerial Council on Drug Strategy was a step in the right direction and concur with its aims (to reduce the incidence of intoxication, enhance public safety and amenity, improve health outcomes and facilitate safer and healthier drinking cultures). However, we do not believe that the strategy has been sufficiently resourced to effectively achieve its ambitions, and remain concerned that its three year operational horizon is insufficient – particularly now that it is half way through 2008 with little to show for its efforts.

The Australian Greens advocate a sustained, comprehensive, long-term strategy to reduce alcohol-related harm, decrease the incidence of underage drinking and alcohol-related violence, improve referral, treatment and support for problem drinkers, and promote a culture of safe and responsible alcohol consumption.

We believe that a total ban on alcohol advertising, sponsorship and promotional activities should be supported by volumetric tax on alcohol that sends a clear price signal to young and problem drinkers and supports greater resources for alcohol treatment and rehabilitation through hypothecation.

We believe that large, well designed health warning labels with strong and well-targeted messages can play a key role in reminding drinkers at the point of consumption of strong health and safety messages that have been promoted through well-resourced community education and social marketing campaigns.

The Australian Greens believe that reducing the availability of alcohol through restricting the number of alcohol outlets and trading hours should be backed up by place-based strategies to reducing alcohol-related harm and violence and improve the safety and public amenity of late night entertainment precincts and other problem areas.

We believe that we need a more joined-up and better resourced approach to referral, treatment and rehabilitation services for problem drinkers that maximises the benefits of early intervention, and ensures that those seeking help can access appropriate support in a timely and effective fashion.

Recommendations:

- 1. A total ban on all alcohol advertising, sponsorship and promotional activities in Australia.**
- 2. Consider additional excise measures on specific products which are attractive to under-age drinkers, such as RTDs.**
- 3. Support well-resourced and targeted evidence-based public education and social marketing campaigns to educate at-risk groups of the risks associated with problem drinking and promote a culture of responsible drinking.**
- 4. Institute alcohol labelling regulations that stipulate distinctive, graphic and well-designed health warning labels under the consumer protection provisions of the Trade Practices Act comparable to the current regulations relating to tobacco.**
- 5. Ensure that alcohol labels also contain nutritional information including additives and calorific levels – and trial the use of doughnut equivalents as a strategy to reduce binge drinking among younger women.**
- 6. Work with state and local governments to introduce place-based strategies in late-night entertainment precincts and other problem drinking areas to reduce alcohol-related harm and violence and improve public safety and amenity.**
- 7. Support a joined-up client-focussed approach to alcohol referral, treatment and rehabilitation that ensures that those seeking services can access them in a timely fashion and are seamlessly supported throughout their rehabilitation process.**
- 8. Develop identification and referral services for at-risk drinkers to maximise the benefits of early intervention, particularly among younger drinkers.**
- 9. Put in place processes to collect better data on alcohol related harms and costs.**

- 10. Introduce a volumetric tax on alcohol at a rate that sends a strong price signal, with this excise hypothecated to fund substantive alcohol education, treatment and rehabilitation services.**
- 11. Reduce the availability of alcohol through tighter restrictions on the number of alcohol outlets and tighter limits on trading hours.**

**Senator Rachel Siewet
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