

Our Hotel – May 2008

Youth binge drinking

Youth binge drinking has gripped the public and political imagination. The Prime Minister has described it as an epidemic. He has parents asking him about it in shopping malls and he has teenage children himself so he shares their concern.

The Commonwealth government has allocated \$53 million to policies attacking it. At the moment there are six different inquiries or reviews of alcohol policy underway by the Commonwealth. New South Wales is finalising regulations for its 2007 Liquor Act. Queensland is bringing in substantial changes to its licensing regime, and Tasmania has a Bill that substantially increases the penalties for serving underage customers.

The Australian governments are reacting to the problem and the public's concerns about public safety and the health of their children.

But what is binge drinking and is it any worse than previously? The media believes that it is worse than it ever was – it is a great story. The anti-alcohol groups would have us believe it. They see a great opportunity to get their agenda implemented by the new Rudd government.

'Binge drinking' is a term that academics don't use because it is imprecise. Amongst the rest of us, it used to mean a long drinking session, at least a day. Now it is regarded as more than seven standard drinks for men, and five standard drinks for women.

There are lots of one-off surveys of drinking reported in the media, but they are often small and unreliable, and they don't show any trends.

There are only two reliable surveys of Australian drinking habits: the National Drug Strategy Household Survey, which started in 1985, and the Australian Secondary School Student Survey, which began in 1984. Both surveys are conducted every three years by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. The last Household Survey was in 2007 and the results should be released in the next two months. This means that everyone is using old data until then.

The Distilled Spirits Industry Council of Australia commissioned Professor Ian McAllister of the Australian National University in 2005 and 2006 to examine the surveys and to plot out the underlying trends for alcohol consumption among young people.

Professor McAllister's work shows the problem is not getting worse – as far as anyone can know until the next set of survey results are released.

But that is no comfort for the alcohol industry. The binge drinking may not be getting worse but it has to be acknowledged that there is a binge drinking problem, and it should be reduced.

The reality is that the Australian nation is ageing and becoming more risk-averse and less tolerant of the problems that come with alcohol abuse. As the cost of health care goes up, the cost of treating alcohol-related illnesses goes up. Australians are having fewer children, and we are increasingly protective of them.