

## **National Liquor News – March 2008**

### **Government's campaign on binge drinking wins industry support**

Last week the Labor Government announced its first response to the rising public concern about youth binge drinking.

The Prime Minister announced that \$53m would be spent on three initiatives: a hard hitting television, radio and internet advertising campaign, support for community organisations to combat binge drinking, particularly helping sporting clubs to serve alcohol responsibly, and moves to get young people to take greater personal responsibility for their behaviour.

The Government was quickly congratulated by the spirits industry for starting these policy changes. The new policies will start addressing the problems of youth binge drinking which, anecdotally at least, is more apparent than ever. However, there are strong elements of a media beat-up and a moral panic about youth binge drinking.

Many of the 'facts' quoted in the media are from reputable but dated studies in 2004 and 2006. If you look at the earlier versions of the same studies, you find that there is actually a slight decrease in youth binge drinking. DSICA anticipates there will be some government surveys released later this year that will give a better picture of the scale of the problem.

More specifically, the government will spend \$20 million over two years in a "hard hitting television, radio and internet campaign that confronts young people with the costs and consequences of binge drinking" to quote the Prime Minister, who spoke about the adverts having the same impact as the AIDS/HIV Grim Reaper ads in the 1980's.

The Commonwealth will also be looking at community-level initiatives to change the binge drinking culture. Funding of \$14.4m would be available, in particular to sporting clubs to fix the level of heavy drinking in their bars. The Prime Minister waved the big stick of government funding being ended for those clubs who do not cut down the binge drinking in their bars.

DSICA, and other industry bodies, had already been supporting something very similar through DrinkWise's contribution to the Good Sports program.

The Prime Minister's emphasis on personal responsibility was particularly cheering. The Commonwealth is putting up \$19.1m to back early intervention and diversion programs for people under the age of 18. The funding will go to programs that help young binge drinkers to control their drinking. This could mean requiring young people to be in educational and/or diversionary activities, or allowing the authorities to confiscate alcohol and provide formal warnings.

Ultimately, people are responsible for their behaviour and a well judged mix of help and sanctions for young binge drinkers (as opposed to penalising the industry) should reinforce that responsibility.

The Prime Minister's announcement of these last two initiatives had a strong emphasis on local solutions through communities. The liquor industry should see what part it can play in supporting this, because many of the binge drinking problems are local in nature and are best solved with local solutions, instead of a new set of nationwide or statewide regulations.

All of these initiatives will be evaluated in a year's time and the Government will see if there has been sufficient progress. If not, the Prime Minister signalled, further steps will be taken.