

National Liquor News - Leaders Forum 2015

DSICA has a long-standing maxim: you cannot understand how Australians are drinking without understanding Australian society and how that is changing. At the heart of Australia's never-ending debates about alcohol and its regulation, there are always hidden arguments about values, what are acceptable levels of risk, and conflicting sets of ideals of what our society should be.

What do I mean alcohol debates are arguments about values? The anti-alcohol groups - and the rest of the public health movement - simply cannot accept that alcohol is enjoyable, pleasurable, or in fact beneficial in any way. They certainly don't give public voice to those ideas. Because they can't accept alcohol for its enjoyment, its ability to give pleasure, or to increase sociability, they cannot conceive that anyone would knowingly choose to drink. This then leads them to conclude that people start drinking and continue drinking "poison" solely because the alcohol industry has some foul influence over them. Apparently it's our advertising.

Drinkers - who are the great majority of adults in Australia - obviously have a different view. They value what alcohol contributes to their lives overall, knowing they have to manage the pros and cons of drinking. It is deeply unfortunate that some lose sight of how much they are drinking and take it so far that they become deeply dependent and harm themselves or others around them. The point I make (and it is something that most adults know) is that alcohol is neither all good or all bad, and the industry's arguments must reflect that. That's much wiser than the absolutist approach of the public health movement.

The apparent influence of the industry appears to be affecting the anti-alcohol groups' perceptions. I have noticed over the past year that their public statements rarely if ever mention or discuss what drinkers might want. The entire alcohol supply chain appears to consist only of the commercial suppliers and retailers, as if there are no consumers at all.

Attitudes to risk and what are acceptable risks also drive much of our nation's debate. Every public opinion survey shows a steep age gradient in support for more restrictive regulations, especially late-night trading hours. Similarly, every survey shows that women are more favourable towards greater restrictions than men. The people who go to our late-night entertainment precincts are predominantly the younger citizens and they accept what small risks exist because a) past experience gives them a much better grasp than their parents have of what really occurs after midnight, and b) they get a lot of value from being out late in pubs and clubs.

In contrast their parents rarely if ever go out after midnight, definitely don't go to night clubs and so have no real idea of the dynamics of the entertainment precinct. They do however believe what the media tell them is happening, and what the anti-alcohol groups tell the media. As the parents don't enjoy nightclubs any longer, it is no skin off their nose if the nightclubs are shut down and then they would sleep easier at night.

When people should be asleep at night brings me to my last point: the debate as being about what sort of society we want. Crackdowns on alcohol availability and advertising appeal to people who would very much like a much safer, more orderly nation, an Australia that is literally more sober in its behaviour and attitudes.

But those Australians who value having the freedoms to make their own decisions, to make their own choices as adults about how they want to live their lives, acutely resent having their choices taken away because a minority of individuals and some health and parent NGOs are fearful of drinkers and drinking. This majority of Australians may or may not enjoy a frequent drink, but they don't want to lose the choice to have one if they want.

So when polled, Australians can largely agree that Australia has issues with alcohol but also vehemently disagree about what the nation or their state should do in response.

The problem for the alcohol industry is that governments do not measure their citizens' enjoyment and pleasure; governments only measure things that cost them money, such as ambulance callouts, hospital admissions and police wages. So as far as a government is concerned, the ledger is always against us and more regulation would lower the government's costs.

As I write, the Queensland State election is in full swing and the New South Wales election is gearing up for the next two months. The two elections are giving those states' anti-alcohol groups plenty of opportunity to shout their views. And as always, except for a few honourable exceptions, the industry lets them play in the media unchallenged. We need to have a louder voice.