

National Liquor News - March 2015

Who's speaking for the community?

DSICA recently attended a stakeholder consultation meeting held by a State government licensing body. I won't go into the purpose of the meeting because that would identify the state.

Somewhat surprisingly, the invited stakeholders were a mixture of industry and community stakeholders. This was surprising because usually the two types of stakeholders are kept well apart and consultations are held separately. The anti-alcohol groups and the supporting academics tend to turn on the industry and business representatives, and then the whole meeting becomes bogged down and distracted from its purpose. But at this meeting there was a mix.

One very vocal person said he was speaking on behalf of the community. He repeated he was speaking on behalf of the community several times. I guess the state government had identified him as 'a community representative'.

I wondered how he had gained a position of speaking for the community, and how he knew he was truly representing the community's wishes. When was the election held? How many people had voted in it, and had voted for him in particular?

The states and territories have populations of at least several hundred thousand, if not millions of people. Even a small town has several thousand people. So it's almost impossible for a person to claim that he or she is representing 'the community' without some formal process for judging what the majority of the community wants.

'The community' is more than just the people who show up in a local public hall meeting space because they are concerned about something. That's not 'the community'. Even if you are the leader of a group of such people, you are still not representing your community, you are just representing a highly vocal group.

I don't blame state governments for endeavouring to engage with such groups; they are legitimate stakeholders and they have a view. I just hope that the bureaucracy doesn't mistake them for actually representing anyone other than themselves.

All of which leads me to my second point. There are actually very few alcohol policy NGO groups that are voluntarily funded by the public as private individuals. Perhaps one such group is the Independent Order of Rechabites, the last remnants of the great 19th century temperance movement. Another example would be the Thomas Kelly Foundation.

The great majority of those critical of drinking, the alcohol industry, and current alcohol policies are financially dependent on taxpayers via the government, either as a state-supported NGO, as a researcher in the alcohol studies field, or part of local government.

Actual ordinary members of the public willing to reach into their own pockets and fund a campaign against alcohol availability are vanishingly rare. There is no popular movement behind the anti-alcohol groups.