

## **National Liquor News – 2014 Leaders Forum**

Watching the alcohol debate play out in several states and territories over the Christmas and New Year period, I was often reminded of the very old joke about the man out late at night searching for his house keys under a streetlight. A passer-by stops to help the man and after a while asks if the man was certain that this was where he dropped the keys. The man replies that he had no idea where he lost his house keys but at least under the streetlight he could see the ground.

The parallel with the alcohol and violence debate is that state governments are looking for changes to stop alcohol-related violence in all the familiar ways (licensing processes, opening hours, police crackdowns, sentencing, etc) because that's where they have their streetlight in the form of existing legislation and regulation powers.

Another parallel is how the public health advocates use the tobacco control model - much higher prices, much harder to purchase and bans on marketing - and say it should be copied across in its entirety to deal with alcohol. For those in public health, that is where their streetlight is.

Unfortunately, this approach limits their range of imagination about new concepts, which we desperately need because I am not at all sure that Australia has a new 'alcohol problem'. I think what we have is a new 'unprovoked random violence problem' in the form of a very small percentage of young Australians (mostly men) who are incredibly self-centred, hedonistic, and who - at heart - are without much regard for other people. A famous Australian psychologist called them "under-parented". Only a very small percentage of such people are needed to cause chaos and incredible violence in our streets.

I have also noticed in the last few months that several state and territory police forces had a bad case of cognitive dissonance. They could announce record amphetamine seizures at the morning press conference, and then deplore alcohol-related violence in the entertainment precincts in the afternoon press conference, without ever drawing any link between the two issues.

The nature of the violence has also become far worse: more vicious, prolonged and deliberately intended to seriously injure. A punch is no longer enough; stamping on heads is common. Every Police Commissioner has publicly said the same thing at some point in the past five years. Just how this is the doing of the alcohol industry or a function of our opening hours, or how we would go about changing it is, quite frankly, beyond me.

I was recently challenged that the alcohol industry is always negative about any changes and never suggests any solutions. I think that accusation is an unfair summary of how the industry responds to these challenges. Solving these deep-rooted social problems is largely outside the influence of the alcohol industry. If someone suggests we are to be involved - beyond demands we shut early the bottle stores and on-premise venues - somehow it always ends up as a demand from public health advocates that we give up the right to advertise and communicate with our customers.

The huge set of changes in New South Wales introduced by Premier O'Farrell will be watched by everyone interested in alcohol control policies. How well they work, or if they work, will be very interesting to see in the coming two or three years. One of the things that was missing from the New South Wales announcement was an increase in funding for OLGR licensing inspectors or dedicated

Police to check that licensing conditions and RSA are being enforced. DSICA does welcome the testing drug and alcohol testing of offenders suspected of a violent assault.

State-based issues will be the major focus of DSICA in the coming year. States and territories are scrambling to answer public concerns at alcohol-related violence in major entertainment precincts. These concerns seem to be increasing- aided and abetted by journalists - irrespective of whether the alcohol-related violence trends are increasing or decreasing.

Unfortunately for the distilled spirits sector and for the on-premise customers, bans on serving spirits after a set times or in ways such as shots or cocktails are very easy to add onto other measures to pad out the appearance of doing something about the alcohol-related violence problem. How they deter the determined drunk is never satisfactorily answered. But their drawback is always that they reduce the choices available to consumers and treat adults just a little bit more like naughty children.

DSICA has always had the belief that all alcohol is alcohol is alcohol, and we argue for this position both in the taxation area and in the licensing regulation sphere. The issue isn't what people are drinking; it is how much alcohol they are consuming over what time.