

National Liquor News – Leaders Forum

Essential to hear from all of the community

I recently spent a few days in New Zealand liaising with my Kiwi counterpart. New Zealand has spent the last four years in an incredibly bitter and bruising debate about alcohol policy and then legislating a new licensing Act.

The new Sale and Supply of Alcohol Act intends to reduce the availability of alcohol, particularly to wind-back the numbers of small bottle stores posing as milk-bars, and to have earlier closing times for on-premise licences. One of the things it allows for is local councils to establish a Local Alcohol Policy for its area, and appoint a three-person committee to make licensing decisions for that area. Those committees' powers include setting license numbers and types, locations, and closing times, etc. Licensing lawyers are already saying that it will take years of court cases to sort out what the limits are, and how these committees will operate in practice.

People connected to the alcohol industry are banned from being members, and only one of the three people has to be an elected member of the local council. It is hard to see ordinary citizens being bothered to volunteer for the job. I suspect it will be easy for those very concerned about alcohol or the socially conservative to get onto their local committee, from where they can continually argue for the toughest licensing regime possible.

Local governments in NZ are already busy surveying their residents as to what they want to see in the Local Alcohol Policy. Questions are being asked: more venues or fewer, earlier closing times or later, etc. Is there too much drinking in the area? While I can't fault the local authorities for getting on and asking their communities what they want to see in the way of an alcohol industry, I also know that most people don't bother replying to local government surveys. Those that do answer surveys tend to be those deeply concerned about the survey's topic, or those with a lot of time on their hands. Families and elderly home-owners, not share-flatters. In short, it is hard to see the young and single being a representative share of the surveys' responses. But it is the young and single who will be the most affected by the slow erosion of freedoms the new alcohol policies will bring.

Here is another example of how the public's feedback can be biased. I read a newspaper column by one New Zealand MP opposed to a bottle store opening because there were already two other stores nearby. He said the community opposed the bottle store. I would argue that if his community truly did not want the bottle store there, it would not get enough trade and it would close down.

The MP was mistaking his community as being just those people opposed strongly enough to contact him about the issue, plus the organised groups of alcohol campaigners. In reality, his community was made up of many more people but they were invisible on whether or not the bottle store should open. In fact, they probably didn't even know a new bottle store was contemplated.

Here in Australia, there are similar issues at play. Our industry ignores them at its peril.

Australian politicians and bureaucrats are hearing plenty from deeply concerned people in the community and from those health NGOs most actively opposed to alcohol. They also hear these

concerns repeated at churches and at school gatherings. But they are not hearing too much from ordinary drinkers who don't want the ever-greater restrictions and who object to be treated more and more like children. This is particularly the case in our states and territories when dealing with policing and licensing issues.

Based on the public comments I read whenever a new restriction is suggested by the anti-alcohol groups, I am convinced that the great majority of Australian drinkers want to see those who actually misbehave or commit crimes singled out and punished, in place of more and more pre-emptive regulations and laws for everyone, just in case something bad might happen. So the motivation is already there to push back at the ever-encroaching, zero-risk approach in policing and preventative health.

But the alcohol industry must be realistic. Drinkers will not motivate themselves to find out about the latest set of draft regulations proposed by the Police Commissioner and Licensing Authority. Nor will many then write letters to editors or call their MP.

But they might be bothered to register their opposition and annoyance if we can explain what's going on and then give them an easy way to communicate with their local politicians.

That way the whole of the community is heard by politicians, and everyone's viewpoint is considered.