

National Liquor News - October 2012

De-normalisation Demands

One of the central policies of Australia's more extreme anti-alcohol groups is that alcohol has to be 'de-normalised'.

Not drunkenness. Not abuse. Alcohol consumption at any level is the 'de-normalisation' target.

De-normalising drinking means that it becomes unusual, and then drinkers will have to argue for their drinking to be allowed against an unspoken official presumption that it is not 'normal'.

'De-normalised' is policy codeword for stigmatised. Smokers have suffered from a 'de-normalisation' policy for many years, and are now the easiest of political targets for higher taxes, more restrictions, and basically being made to suffer for being a smoker alongside whatever ill-health smoking brings them. This has taken thirty or so years, so the battle has been a long one.

Successfully de-normalising alcohol is essential if the public is ever going to accept the policies that the more extreme anti-alcohol groups want in place. This de-normalisation will also be a very long campaign of small gains, each one a small, and oh-so reasonable step that will be hard for drinkers to effectively resist. Each step for their own good, of course.

So DSICA was startled when the Australian Medical Association called for the drinking age to be lifted to 25. Startled, because it is an obviously wrong suggestion and not part of the process of slow de-normalisation. It does, however, make a drinking age of 21 appear to be a reasonable compromise.

The current drinking age has a lot of support because age 18 is when people can vote and join the armed forces. At the AMA's suggested age of 25, they will have voted in at least two federal elections, and could have served seven tours of duty in a war before being trusted to buy a drink.

Another recent policy demand was from the Australian Drug Foundation for a ban on any drinking by parents under any circumstances at all school events. Here the 'de-normalisation' term was openly used.

The ADF's thinking is that schools are insufficiently anti-alcohol and that can't be allowed, so another new regulation is needed to take away schools' discretion about when and where parents can enjoy a drink on school premises.

Both of these policy demands were quickly rejected by public opinion, but they will come back in some other, milder form. De-normalisation is, after all, a very long campaign.