

## **National Liquor News - February 2010**

### **The culture of drinking verses the culture of drunks**

2009 was a year when all sectors of the alcohol industry went through a firestorm of criticism about alcohol –related violence and underage drinking. Many of the professional critics of the alcohol industry quickly blamed that abuse on our industry. Those criticisms were designed more for easy consumption by the media and political decision-makers than for adding to the debate.

What we heard belatedly in the second half of last year was an emerging conversation about the important role of a culture of drunkenness. Even Police Commissioners – some of the harshest critics of the industry – started to talk about the underlying culture of the people who carry out the violence and behave like obnoxious fools while heavily intoxicated.

In the great alcohol debate of 2009, Australians also began to appreciate that the problems they faced in their city centres and in the entertainment precincts were the same problems being faced by many other developed nations. It was a global problem, not just an Australian one, therefore it was unlikely to be solely or even predominately caused by local factors such as opening hours or market shares, or the drinking age.

The public conversation about the differences between drinkers and the obnoxious and violent drunks developed when people began to realise that there were some obvious questions that simply cracking down on licensees and the industry's marketing was not going to answer.

Questions such as this: if alcohol is the cause of violence and anti-social behaviour, then why is it that the great majority of people who drink, and who may even occasionally become drunk, never become violent or verbally abusive?

If it was simply about alcohol, then why are the related assaults becoming more severe than in previous decades? Why were individuals being attacked by groups more frequently, and why were the attacks now including stamping on heads and kicks to the spine? The alcohol is the same as it has been for millennia.

Why are more women, at all ages but particularly young women, now apparently drinking in harmful ways than in previous years? Assaults committed by women are also rising.

All of these questions are about much broader and more difficult cultural issues, rather than just the usual simplistic arguments about licensing hours, numbers of premises, or advertising and sport.