

ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION

9 April 2008

The Hon. D.G.E. HOOD: I move:

That the Social Development Committee inquire into and report upon the adequacy and appropriateness of laws and practices relating to the sale and consumption of alcohol and, in particular, with respect to—

1. Whether those laws and practices need to be modified to better deal with criminal and other antisocial behaviour arising from the consumption of alcohol;
2. The health risks of excessive consumption of alcohol including— (a) 'binge drinking'; and (b) foetal alcohol syndrome;
3. The economic cost to South Australia in dealing with the consequences of alcohol abuse; and
4. Any other relevant matters.

It is now almost a year since Family First federal Senator, Steve Fielding, in mid April 2007, blew the lid on the alcohol epidemic and set in motion a vital debate about matters such as binge drinking and the need to regulate alcohol advertising, amongst other things.

The Family First Alcohol Toll Reduction Bill 2007 is now before a Senate committee awaiting submissions. In addition to the federal review, we think there are members of the South Australian parliament, from all sides of both chambers, who have something very useful to contribute to the debate about curbing excessive alcohol consumption.

I pay credit to the Hon. Bob Such in the other place who has approached me in private about this issue; to some extent, the terms of reference of this proposed inquiry also reflect the concerns raised by the member for Fisher.

Excessive alcohol consumption, including the scourge of binge drinking, has been ingrained in Australian culture for generations—since white man first settled here some 200 years ago. Honourable members can probably recall over the years countless headline-making incidences of drunken episodes by members of the public or celebrities in public venues, planes, foreign shores and elsewhere. Some of these episodes were once celebrated as heroic or condemned as foolish, sometimes both, depending on one's point of view.

In 2008, this has translated, especially amongst the younger generation, into an attempt to emulate at some level what are perceived as role models and, in some instances, that has meant adopting a binge drinking lifestyle.

Many of the members in this place would have seen the *Enough Rope* television program recently aired on the ABC featuring Wayne Carey, for whom many of us would have a great deal of admiration because of his football exploits. Here is a man who, during his decorated playing career, almost singlehandedly took teams apart yet, as a captain, he coordinated drinking sessions with his team mates, where he would consume, according to his own admission, up to 30 beers in one session.

It would be surprising to many people that someone could consume that much alcohol and still conduct themselves well the next day, or the day after that, for that matter, yet, by Mr Carey's own admission, that is exactly what he did. In fact, he claims that that was a regular part of what they did. Mr Carey went into all sorts of other incidents surrounding those events.

The results of the 2004 National Drug Strategy household survey showed that one in seven women could not remember afterwards what had happened whilst they were drinking. In relation to young people in certain subcultures in Australia, with binge drinking you get a very dangerous cocktail that needs addressing.

In recent times, we have passed the Criminal Law Consolidation (Rape and other Sexual Offences) Amendment Bill, and I think it is critical that, in considering this type of rape, you must look at the problem of alcohol consumption as well, as often the two can be closely related. Indeed, parliament has heard evidence on the very dangerous correlation between binge drinking and unwanted sexual advances.

Before moving on to some specific data and to reassure honourable members that I am not overstating the point in describing binge drinking as a scourge, I will quote the federal member for Adelaide, the Hon. Kate Ellis, the Minister for Youth and Sport, who was blogging just yesterday on the *Adelaide Now* website as part of Youth Week. She wrote the following at 12.40pm:

We—I assume by 'we' she means the federal Rudd government—

are concerned at the alarming rate of teenage binge drinking and the risks that this poses to our community. It is important that people are aware of the dangers and damages that this can cause. The chances of being involved in violent assaults, drink driving accidents, sexual assault or personal injury spike if you engage in binge drinking activities—this is to say nothing of the health effects.

Then at 1.51pm, during the blog, she wrote:

I think that binge drinking is an issue that needs to be addressed right across our community. Having said this, teen binge drinking levels are at horrifying levels and remain a key priority to address.

So, that was Kate Ellis, the Minister for Youth and Sport, just yesterday on the *Adelaide Now* website.

I want to move beyond these anecdotal points, although I do think they illustrate the magnitude and severity of the problems of alcohol abuse, and move on to the substance of this motion to give members some hard data to contemplate as they weigh the merits of this inquiry.

I want to begin with something that came across my desk just last week, the *Of Substance* magazine, which I regularly receive at my office and which I understand a number of other members also receive. The April edition begins with the following words from Dr John Herron, Chairman of the Australian National Council on Drugs:

This April 2008 *Of Substance* issue may become part of a watershed moment for dealing with alcohol issues in Australia. The National Public Opinion Survey on Alcohol commissioned by *Of Substance* has provided us with more clear evidence that the community wants to see changes in the way we regulate, promote, market and use alcohol in Australia. The announcement of a federal Senate inquiry into alcohol—

which I note for honourable members is the inquiry into Senator Fielding's bill, to which I have already referred and which is due to report in mid June 2008—

will provide a real launchpad for action, and the results of the *Of Substance* national opinion survey will be a core part of the submission of the ANCD to assist the inquiry.

It seems that some influential people are certainly agreeing that there is a significant problem in the community with respect to not only binge drinking but also the negative impacts that can be associated with excessive alcohol consumption. To give further data and specifically to follow on from the reference that I just made, what did the ANCD find? These are the findings released this month. Its survey was run from 19 to 20 December last year, when it polled some 1,054 people aged between 18 and 69 across Australia. It found a number of very alarming things.

The first thing was that 85 per cent of people expressed concern about alcohol in relation to public safety; 84 per cent in relation to property damage; and 82 per cent in relation to alcohol increasing the workload of police and emergency service staff due to alcohol related matters. I will return to the police work side of it a little later, but some 85 per cent expressed concern. It also found that over 50 per cent of respondents believed that there should be a levy on alcohol products to help fund treatment and prevention services.

One of the potential beneficiaries of such a levy, the National Alcohol Education and Rehabilitation Foundation (ADR), has identified that alcohol abuse is estimated to cost some \$15.3 billion annually. I will return to that issue a little later.

Most respondents believe that alcohol advertising should be reviewed by an independent body; note (and this is very important): not an industry self-regulating body, but an independent body. Self regulation in many cases is really no regulation. They believe that this advertising should be reviewed by an independent body before that advertising appears in the media—'before' being the important word. More specifically, only 11 per cent of respondents disagreed with the suggestion of an independent body to screen alcohol advertising—a clear, very low minority.

Referring to RTDs, 80 per cent of people believe that these are specifically designed to appeal to young people and, in fact, the 2004 National Drug Strategy Household Survey data, to which I will refer in a moment, demonstrated that the most popular beverage types in 2004 for 14 to 24 year olds are bottled spirits, liqueurs and pre-mixes in cans and bottles, plus, for males, regular strength beer—probably not surprisingly.

Of the people surveyed, 63 per cent were very concerned about underage drinking without parental permission or supervision, with a further 27 per cent somewhat concerned, making a total of 90 per cent either very concerned or somewhat concerned about underage drinking without parental permission or supervision. The results go on. Of those surveyed, 52 per cent were very concerned, and further 34 per cent somewhat concerned, giving a total of 86 per cent being concerned about underage drinking where parents actually give permission but where there is no supervision.

On the subject of underage drinking, the DrugInfo Clearinghouse found in 2002 that young people, when intoxicated, are more likely to indulge in risky behaviour such as swimming, driving, unsafe or unwanted sex, or verbal or physical abuse). Of the people surveyed, 65 per cent were very concerned and 25 per cent somewhat concerned, giving a total of 90 per cent being concerned about underage binge drinking. Of those surveyed, 36 per cent were very concerned and 43 per cent somewhat concerned, giving a total of 79 per cent being concerned about binge drinking specifically by 18 to 29 year olds.

I note that, in defining binge drinking, 75 per cent of respondents said that binge drinking was drinking more than five standard drinks on one occasion. Alarming, 20 per cent of the people thought that a drinking session was not binge drinking until more than 10 standard drinks were

consumed in that session. I might add that the National Health and Medical Research Council found in 2001 that binge drinking led to an increased incidence of falls, accidents, including motor vehicle accidents, and violence. Indeed, the Minister for Mental Health and Substance Abuse, in her answer to the Hon. Mr Hunter's question on 20 June 2006 in this place, stated that every year some 41,000 South Australians are physically abused by people affected by alcohol.

The ANCD and other researchers identified that 450,000 children under the age of 12 are at risk of being exposed to binge drinking in their home by a parent or another adult, approaching half a million children under 12. This initial ANCD data is compelling. I think that the Social Development Committee will do well to draw upon the expertise of those who will, we are told, contribute to a July 2008 issue of *Of Substance*, the magazine to which I referred earlier, to explore the implications of the survey.

I mentioned binge drinking in that initial ANCD data, and I think it wise to mention here that I read recently—and I cannot put my hands on it right at the moment—comments by a senior figure in the Australian Hotels Association that we need to take action against binge drinking. It may have been an editorial comment in the most recent AHA newsletter. I think we all know the power of the AHA and the liquor industry in terms of political donations and influence. I do hope, however, that it can put its self-interest aside and be a positive contributor to this inquiry to somehow impact on and reduce the massive social, health and economic cost of alcohol abuse.

The 2004 National Drugs Strategy Household Survey identified some concerning trends amongst 14 to 24 year olds in our community. Three particular things are worth noting. First, for each successive 10-year generation over the past 50 years, initiation into drinking has been occurring at earlier ages. By the age of 14, twice as many young people in the now 20 to 29 year old age bracket had consumed alcohol than those who are now in the 40 to 59 age bracket—twice as many.

The second point worthy of note is that by 18 years of age approximately 50 per cent of males and females are what are considered risky drinkers, with a majority of 67 per cent saying that they are just social drinkers; in other words, in some denial about the risks their drinking poses to their own health and the health of others. Finally, on average, nationwide, 264 young people, defined as aged between 15 and 24, die each year due specifically to risky drinking.

Another relevant matter to consider in relation to binge drinking was something that the previous health minister, the member for Little Para, placed on record in answer to a Dorothy Dixier about the Good Sports Accreditation program on 28 October 2004, when she stated:

Clubs participating in the pilot program identified that binge drinking and under age access to alcohol are big issues for sporting clubs in South Australia.

We are now some 3½ years past that and I think the committee would be well entitled to consider whether the Good Sports program has been effective in reducing risky drinking behaviours, such as binge drinking. The committee might also do well to take submissions from not only the hotel sector but the club sector as well for an insight into the prevalence of binge and other risky drinking behaviours at licensed venues.

One constituent whom we spoke to recently indicated that as a volunteer barperson at a community club, he was dismayed to see young people spend over \$100 a night on alcohol and, indeed, in some cases, much more than that. At other times when he told binge drinkers for their own good that he was not going to serve them any more alcohol, he was dismayed at the abuse he received. He also reported that when he spoke to these young people days later, these young people remembered little, if anything, of the abuse that they gave him during their binge drinking episode. Indeed, in many cases they remembered little of the night at all.

Family First research indicates that, aside from the 264 young people nationwide dying per annum directly related to risky drinking, there are some 4,300 deaths per year caused by alcohol abuse. Research data from 2003 shows that in South Australia from 1990 to 2001 there were almost 2,500 deaths from harmful drinking, which at roughly 227 a year in South Australia correlates fairly closely with our per capita share of the nationwide 4,300 deaths per year.

I think it is worth pointing out that some 3½ years ago, specifically on 22 November 2004 in this place, my colleague, the Hon. Andrew Evans MLC, raised concerns about binge drinking when asking a question about youth deaths from alcohol—also referring to the National Drug Institute data—indicating that one in six youth deaths could be attributed to excessive consumption of alcohol. Indeed, today in question time, my colleague, the Hon. Andrew Evans, has continued his concern in this area when asking the minister whether she will follow her New South Wales colleague's action to curb binge drinking.

The National Health and Medical Research Council has in the past produced alcohol safety guidelines detailing the relatively safe number of standard drinks to take as well as the risks of drinking whilst pregnant. Family First has said during this year of debate since last April that we should be applying those to alcohol labelling in the same way that we do with lung cancer and other health warnings on cigarette packaging, for example.

Family First research indicates that at least 20 per cent of road deaths feature alcohol as a factor, and I recall that coronial data indicates that there is such a correlation between fatal road deaths and alcohol consumption with a high number of deceased persons in car accidents having alcohol in their bloodstream.

I also think it fair to mention anecdotally, as honourable members will have seen, not only the proliferation of liquor outlets—witness, for example, the Sip'n'Save advertisements and the number of liquor outlets co-located at Woolworths or suburban outlets, such as Dan Murphy's, Liquorland and Plonk!, or the like—but in addition to that proliferation and perhaps with the increased competition, a driving down of prices such that alcohol is now cheaper than ever before.

In August 2006, the Australian Bureau of Statistics released a snapshot of Australia's alcohol consumption in 2004-05 and it found a number of things, including, first, via the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare data, alcohol dependence and harmful use was ranked 17th in the 20 leading causes of the burden of disease and injury for Australia in 2003, and harm from alcohol was estimated to be the cause of 5.5 per cent of the burden of disease for males, and 2.2 per cent for females. That is all disease.

Secondly, 12.5 per cent of all adult Australians—and that is not just the young ones—drank at a risky or 'high risk' level. Thirdly, the proportion of those who drink at a risky level has risen from 8.2 per cent in 1995, to 10.8 per cent in 2001, to 13.4 per cent in 2004-05. The figures are on the rise.

Finally, in relation to that data, the increase in those drinking at a risky or high risk level since 1995 has been greater for women than for men, the number of women rising from 6.2 per cent to 11.7 per cent (or by a factor of 5.5 per cent) whereas the number of men rose from 10.3 per cent to 15.2 per cent (an increase of some 4.9 per cent).

On the subject of risky drinking, the state government's own Alcohol.go easy website claims that 180,000 South Australians drink at harmful levels once a month and I think it is a staggering figure alone when you consider the latest ABS estimate of our state population is some 1.588 million and, leaving out the very young who presumably do not drink at all, it has got to be perhaps one in seven or one in six teenage to mature South Australians drinking at a harmful level every single month. The government's own figures also recited by the minister on 20 June 2006 in this place show that 86,000 South Australians drink at harmful levels every single week.

In my motion I have mentioned as one particular health effect the question of foetal alcohol syndrome. I am aware that this is sometimes called foetal alcohol spectrum disorder, and I put on record my concerns under that heading as I am intending to see the committee address all the problems that come with the consumption of alcohol and effects upon the unborn child.

I have commented before upon the need for welfare departments to consider taking action when children are born when doctors or other medical staff believe a mother has an alcohol problem because that child deserves the best chance at life. Where research has been conducted into foetal alcohol syndrome incidence rates, for instance in the Top End of the Northern Territory, the incidence rate was 1.87 per 1,000 live births overall and a staggering 4.7 per 1,000 within the indigenous population.

Another study in Western Australia revealed a rate of 0.2 per 1,000 live births overall. Here in South Australia the most recent Birth Defects Register (from 2004) lists foetal alcohol syndrome as having an incidence rate of 1 per 1,000 live births in 2002 and 2003 but nought in 2004. It would be good if the committee could explore what the more recent records indicate as 2004 is some three reporting years ago now and an awareness of foetal alcohol syndrome and perhaps therefore diagnosis has arisen since then.

If the committee obtains evidence from the Women's and Children's Hospital and the data shows that the rate now is something like the Northern Territory's 1.8 per cent overall per 1,000, or even 4.7 as it is amongst indigenous people in that part of the world, when compared against 12 for spina bifida or 14 per 1,000 for cleft palate, I suggest that a returned ranking for foetal alcohol syndrome in the region of 2 to 5 is sufficient reason to be very concerned and to take significant action, especially given the obvious preventive measures that can be taken against this condition.

I suggest that there is every reason to be proactive about foetal alcohol syndrome, especially since there is still a question mark over whether the slightest drink affects an unborn child. If you consider the way in which the smoking industry covered up the lung cancer epidemic and the problems associated with lung cancer through smoking, I find it simple to understand how research continues to emerge muddying the picture on foetal alcohol syndrome.

At the middle of the spectrum of outcomes would come a public rejection of alcohol consumption if even mild consumption affects unborn children; and, at the end of the spectrum there could be lawsuits or class actions if it could be shown that the alcohol industry knew of these risks and did nothing. I will not go into the legal concepts as I am no expert, but I am told that the classic case

of *Donoghue v Stevenson* involved a woman drinking ginger beer with a snail in it, and the liability was found to be upon the maker of the product.

I refer again to foetal alcohol syndrome. I think the National Organisation for Foetal Alcohol Syndrome and Related Disorders ought to be called upon to make a submission to this inquiry, should it proceed.

I have added as an area for the inquiry's consideration the question of economic impact. The AER states in its 2006-07 annual report that alcohol abuse is estimated to cost \$15.3 billion annually across Australia, as I mentioned earlier. We must bear in mind that alcohol contributes to the economy through taxes and the like, such that, as a result of Family First research data, we are looking at a cost to Australian governments of \$7.6 billion. I know the state government's own Alcohol.Go easy website puts it at about \$7 billion.

South Australia's share on a pro rata basis (based on the Australian Bureau of Statistics estimated population in early April 2008 of 21,263,000, with September 2007 quarter ABS data giving a state population of 1.588 million) indicates that a 7.4 per cent share of \$7.6 billion in the cost of alcohol abuse nationwide equates to a bill of some \$567.6 million per annum to the South Australian taxpayer—over \$500 million.

I would be most interested to hear actuaries, economists and other experts explain how the figure might be comprised and even how it matches up with the government's own data on expenditure in alcohol-related areas. I am sure that part of the impact on the state budget is in relation to police work, with Family First research finding that alcohol abuse is responsible for some 40 per cent of police work. The government's own data on the Alcohol.Go easy website states that, out of its estimate on 2002 data of \$7 billion net cost to community, some \$1.2 billion comes in the cost of crime.

Then there are the economic costs in needing to provide hospital services to those who are drunk or who have over-indulged and need hospitalisation due to binge drinking, through to the flow-on consequences of life-threatening health problems due to sustained excessive alcohol abuse. On the harmful drinking side alone, 2003 research data shows that from 1993-94 to 2000-01 there were approximately 40,000 hospitalisations due to harmful drinking—a period of six years. The committee could explore the cost of hospitalisation of each of those people and the flow-on costs to the health system. I am sure that some nurses, emergency department staff and other medical specialists could give some horrific stories of what they have had to deal with as a consequence of binge drinking or other alcohol abuse.

I would like to list a number of proposed reforms. I say in mentioning these reforms that I do not necessarily cast an opinion on them at this stage but, merely, say that these things could be considered by the committee. In face of this weighty data, what could we do as legislators in response? A number of these reforms have been suggested to me by other people. We could ban or restrict the sale of certain potent pre-mixed drinks (sometimes called 'ready to drink' or RTDs) in South Australia. The drinking age should be debated. Is 18 the appropriate drinking age? Should it be raised to 20 or 21? Should we have different ages for different types of drinks, as in some states of the United States?

The committee should investigate the extent to which alcohol companies try to market alcoholic products, such as RTDs and alcohol popsicles. The committee could investigate the advertising of alcohol at sporting events and/or the endorsement of alcohol products by sporting stars. Should the blood alcohol content of drivers aged under 25 be reduced to zero? Should there be tougher enforcement of liquor licensing laws, including allowing South Australian police to use teenagers to test whether under-age drinking laws are being flouted, as currently occurs in 'stinging' retailers who sell cigarettes to under-aged children? Should the committee reconsider appropriate trading hours or alcohol service hours at nightclubs, pubs and clubs and the like, and the number that are licensed to do so?

Should South Australia follow the New South Wales ban on giving alcohol to other people's children so that the only adults who can legally give alcohol to children are that child's parents? I refer again to the Hon. Andrew Evans' question of November 2004 which, in effect, called for stricter parental consent regarding consumption of alcohol; and I note the question to the Attorney-General is yet to be answered.

Further, I note the New South Wales government's lead (as reported on the AAP news wires on Monday 7 April) to require parents to attend counselling with their child if their child is caught under the influence of alcohol, with failure to attend counselling twice resulting in a fine of \$500 (in the case of New South Wales). Initially trialled in Sutherland Shire police local service area since 1999, apparently some 140 under-age drinkers and their parents are attending such mandatory programs. The reform came in response to news in New South Wales that some 1,700 children were treated in hospital in relation to their alcohol consumption each year—some 1,700 children each year in New South Wales alone are treated in hospital as a direct result of their alcohol consumption.

Other reforms might come to mind, if members take the time to consider these measures; and I invite them to bring forward other suggestions. I have not mentioned things such as television advertising, because these are federal issues. I think there are things we could do here in South Australia to do our bit to curb the alcohol toll locally. However, I do note in the data to which I have referred members that some of the data concerns matters nominally falling within the federal jurisdiction, such as advertising at certain sporting venues and the like. However, I think those matters are worth including in order to demonstrate Australia's attitude towards alcohol consumption and the promotion of alcohol in the early 21st century.

I do not want to labour the point further. Clearly, I believe that there is merit in this inquiry, and I urge members to help Family First address this matter; at least, let us put the issue on the table for serious debate. The impact on the community is real, both economically and socially. It is a matter for serious debate. I should place on the record for members' interest that I am a drinker. I have the occasional glass of wine. I am not a heavy drinker, so it is not as though I am calling for prohibition; rather, just a serious debate on a serious problem.