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Teenage Drinking - Who's responsible?

When debate over a social problem gains publicity, there is a political imperative for government to act. Sometimes, government acts wisely; sometimes foolishly and ineffectively. All too often, it is driven by a desire to be *seen* to be doing something about whichever problem has captured the latest headlines.

Such an approach conflicts with both the conservative and the liberal principles upon which this Government is founded.

It conflicts with our conservative principles because the pressure to act at all costs is inconsistent with the belief that advocates of change bear the burden of proof in demonstrating the need for that change. This belief is based on a well-founded fear of the unintended consequences of government action.

It conflicts with our liberal principles because the pressure to try to "solve" social problems can lead government into unjustifiable violations of individual freedom in the hunt for approving headlines.

The problem of teenage drinking is no exception.


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There is unquestionably a role for government in addressing this issue. It is an issue of concern to the community, not least because related problems, like road deaths and street violence, affect the community as a whole.

But governments must resist the temptation to pretend that such problems can be "solved", or that proposed "solutions" are an unqualified good. Nor should government be shy about setting out a demarcation between its own responsibilities and the responsibilities of individuals and families.

I certainly do not mean to belittle the problem of teenage drinking. On the contrary; I believe that it is a chronic problem in Australian society. Survey data shows that drinking to intoxication is a pattern that is common for teenagers.

Many young Australians begin experimenting with alcohol between the ages of 14 and 15 years. The National Drug Strategy Household Survey estimated that 1.2 million teenagers consumed alcohol in 2001. Approximately 6,500 teenagers were daily drinkers, 460,700 were weekly drinkers and a further 730,000 drank less than weekly.

One third of 14-17 year olds consumed alcohol to a level of risk on at least one occasion in the last twelve months. This is a staggering figure. And irresponsible consumption of alcohol as a teenager is a frequent precursor to problems with alcohol as an adult.

Drinking at high levels is unquestionably dangerous for your health. Negative effects can occur following heavy or excessive consumption of alcohol on a regular basis, or following single bouts of alcohol misuse.

The costs to the individual include the immediate effects of resultant accidents, violence, sexual assault, and the long term damage to organs

such as the liver, an increased risk of some cancers, hypertension and psychological problems.

The cost to the community is also considerable, with the financial burden of alcohol misuse estimated to be \$7.6 billion each year. This takes into account lower productivity due to lost work days, road accident costs, and legal and court costs, as well as costs to the health system.

Alcohol abuse, especially by young people, can also be a problem for police. It is the police who are required to restore order when teenage events get out of hand. These are the events that are reported with some frequency in the press and include "Schoolies' Week" activities. Schoolies' Week celebrations are frequently marred by drunken behaviour and the consequences of this behaviour – property damage, assaults and injury. Such problems impact on all members of the community.

Yet before we race to legislate this problem out of existence, we should consider its sources. Teenage drinking is often perceived to be risk-free and a rite of passage. More than one-third of parents provide their underage teenagers with alcohol when they go out.

Do these parents appreciate that the leading causes of death among adolescents – road and pedestrian injuries, homicide and suicide - are all associated with alcohol?

It is in this context that proposals for government intervention must be considered. Certainly, governments could regulate to raise the age at which young people are able to purchase alcohol – perhaps from 18 to 20, or even 21. But we know that more than 40% of underage drinkers currently get their alcohol from parents, the parents of friends or older siblings. We also know that the majority of teenage drinking takes place in the family home or the

homes of friends. Unfortunately, most of this drinking takes place without parental supervision.

Research indicates that parental supervision does indeed reduce the level of heavy drinking. Parental modelling is also crucial. In family settings where drinking to get drunk is accepted, learning to exercise control and restraint over consumption levels is difficult for young people. Conversely, where no alcohol is consumed, the lack of role modelling can have a similar negative effect.

Contrast these conclusions with the campaign evaluation of the National Alcohol Campaign, launched in 2000 and consisting of television advertisements directed at young people, as well as brochures for parents. The evaluation found a high level of recognition of the advertisements and the message – and little impact on the number of people drinking at risky levels.

And while acknowledging the many alcohol-related problems to which I alluded earlier, we must also recognise that alcohol has always had a special place in Australian culture – it is accepted as part of the social fabric. We use alcohol to celebrate our achievements, to commemorate family milestones, to improve social interaction.

Australia is extremely successful as an exporter of high quality alcohol products, particularly award winning wines. In its role as an alcoholic beverage producer, the nation benefits from resultant employment and trade.

So when we turn our attention to the problems of alcohol abuse and teenage drinking, we should remain mindful of the positive contributions which alcohol has made to Australia, both culturally and economically.

Government must also remain cognisant of the hazards of setting policy in an area which has been subjected to such scrutiny.

In "The Road to Serfdom", Friedrich Hayek warned of the danger of government delegating power to committees of experts to determine policy in their specific areas. To the expert, Hayek warned, his or her field of expertise is always the most pressing of problems, deserving of the greatest allocation of resources and the strictest impositions on society.

This is not to dismiss the vital contribution of expert advice to government decision-making. It is merely to say that government must remember the ease with which expert advice can turn into lobbying, no matter how well-intentioned that lobbying may be.

An example is the expert focus on various sweet and colourful ready-to-drink or pre-mixed beverages which are popular with young drinkers, especially young women. It is one thing to identify the market appeal of such products as a contributor to teenage drinking. It would be quite another thing to determine that they pose such a threat to society that government should start micro-managing and regulating the colour or sweetness of alcoholic beverages. The role of government is to balance competing concerns, treating health and drug expert advice as one of several inputs into its decision-making.

It is also pertinent, if this audience will forgive me, to note that government must not allow policy to be set by the media. Individual stories of alcohol abuse and teenage misbehaviour, which were mercifully rare in the recent Schoolies' Week, can easily be extrapolated to create an impression much darker than reality. This can lead to a certain zealotry on the topic

Finally, we should bear in mind the philosophical question of the role of government in regulating individual behaviour. The power of the state should not be exercised reflexively or rashly in social policy. Australia is a free society, and each infringement of individual freedom damages the philosophical basis of our nation that little bit further. The benefits of state intervention must be weighed against the costs.

Ultimately, it is families that bear the responsibility for preventing teenagers from engaging in problem drinking, and it is families that stand the best chance of succeeding. Like it or not, teenagers will continue to find ways to access alcohol. The question is whether they will be brought up with the self-restraint to deal with temptation.

That is not to say that government should be an idle bystander. Governments can and should assist, by funding research into the causes and effects of teenage drinking and running information campaigns to disseminate the products of that research to the broader community.

In that context, I am pleased to announce today that beyondblue, the national depression initiative, has agreed to my request for it to conduct research into the links between teenage alcohol consumption and depression. beyondblue has already done marvellous work in advancing a preventative approach to other areas of teenage depression. I hope that this new research will provide a valuable source of information for Australian families as they seek to ensure that their children avoid engaging in problem drinking or succumbing to the scourge of depression.

I further note that the Ministerial Council on Drug Strategy agreed on 12 November that existing work on teenage drinking will be rolled into the 2005-2009 National Alcohol Strategy, which will commence development early next year.

Meanwhile, the Department of Health and Ageing continues to work on the development of new health promotion resources and materials to increase awareness of the Australian Alcohol Guidelines, which set out the parameters of safe alcohol consumption.

But the role of government is, and will remain, one of support. Government must not usurp the role of families by substituting heavy-handed and ill-considered regulation for individual responsibility.

And I mean *individual* responsibility. For when I say that families bear the ultimate responsibility for addressing the problem of teenage drinking, I refer not only to the parents, but to the teenagers themselves.

One cannot help but wonder whether it is pure coincidence that the rise in concern over drug and alcohol consumption by young people has been broadly coincident with the decline in traditional discipline.

There is a fashionable belief that the parental role should not involve the declaration and enforcement of rules. When young people engage in anti-social behaviour as a result, there are cries for the government to step in and fulfil precisely the role which some parents have chosen to abdicate.

Yet each child is different. Government regulation is, by its nature, a blunt instrument, ill-suited to the rearing of children. Parents must not look to government to do their job for them. And government must not yield to populist temptation by pretending that it can.

Nor is the need for teenagers to accept responsibility for their own drinking habits assisted by the culture of victimhood which pervades much of the discussion of youth issues today.

Scarcely a day passes without another claim regarding the difficulties of growing up today. And no doubt there is some truth to it. Young people do face enormous challenges. But they also face unprecedented opportunities, and possess luxuries that older generations would have dreamed of. We must not yield to the politically correct nostrum that every incident of teenage malfeasance can be attributed to societal factors.

As an example, a recent current affairs story comes to mind. A mother was complaining about how her teenager ran up large mobile phone bills, well beyond the teenager's means to repay. In my teenage days, if you can suspend disbelief to imagine that mobile phones existed or that my parents would have entrusted me with one, I know that my parents would have had no doubt where the blame lay. But in today's society, the teenager was portrayed as the hapless victim of the phone company.

Teenagers are intelligent and acutely perceptive. If our expectations of them are zero, they will deliver zero. If we treat young people like a class of victims and absolve them of all responsibility for their actions, they will not demonstrate responsibility.

It is up to parents and citizens, not governments, to instil in children a sense of responsibility and self-restraint. Government can and will do its best to assist them and to provide the information and support that they need.

But Australia is not a giant health farm, with government acting as personal trainer. It is not the place of government to seize candy from the mouths of babes, or send inspectors into private homes to check whether parents are keeping the liquor cabinet locked.

The Government will continue to run programs of information and education.
As parents and citizens, the rest is up to us.