Alcohol (Minimum Pricing) (Scotland) Bill

Gregor Rimmell

The effect of the proposals will be restricted to off sales. At the illustrative level of 45p per unit, the minimum prices for some categories of alcohol will rise substantially and this could have a beneficial effect on irresponsible consumption. Under proposals cheap products, bought by those with addictions or for binge drinking, will rise in price dramatically, and strong ciders and beers will be increased in price pro rata to normal strength drinks.

The illustrations given, of how minimum pricing will reduce excessive consumption, are likely to be misleading. For example, the reduction in smoking came about as a change of culture, not as a result of price rises caused by above inflation duty increases over years. The use of illegal drugs increases with their availability and the lack of police resources to pursue pushers and users.

There is therefore an argument that says restrict availability of alcohol by reducing hours of sale. In Australia this brought about the six o’clock swill. The exception to restricting hours might be food led establishments, and tourist areas.

The unit price exampled at 45p seems reasonable. The price should be reviewed by parliament, not by order. This will assure the public that it is a democratic procedure, not the whim of a minister or the bureaucracy, who may be perceived as anti-drink, or anti “the working man”. A review of the minimum unit price would reflect the state of the economy.

The bill needs to be redrafted to include elements that are in the supporting information. The supporting information needs to be strengthened by reference to sources. There is no evidence to say that dramatic increases in the price of a unit of alcohol will, pro rata, decrease consumption. There is evidence to say that the least well off spend disproportionately on drink and tobacco. Areas of deprivation show this. They also show that on-licensed premises in such areas are much more resistant to the downturn in on trade elsewhere. Moderate consumers are not the problem. But they will be alienated by hikes in price at a time of economic downturn, and when there is no such increase in England. Excessive consumers will divert their spend from other forms of, say domestic expenditure, causing more social problems, not less. Privileged consumers will buy in bulk from outside Scotland.

LSOs will implement the new policy. The role of LSOs would change from predominantly on trade problem solving to off trade price policing. Premises which seek to sell cheap drink would obviously smuggle in alcohol and sell it under the counter, requiring more detection. Unless more LSOs were
recruited, there would be a rise in dissatisfaction with on-trade performance. More LSOs would increase licensing costs and therefore the costs of licenses. Licensing authorities, not Scottish government would be blamed.

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