Alcohol (Minimum Pricing) (Scotland) Bill

Jonathan Stewart

Alcohol misuse – Jonathan Stewart’s brief analysis based on observations made over 35 years an independent public house licensee and hotelier in Dundee.

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Alcoholic drinks sold for little or nothing as “a sprat to catch a mackerel” are persistently linked to violent incidents and social disorder.

The Scottish Licensed Trade Association (SLTA) and The British Institute of Innkeepers (BII) recognise this. They represent independent bar operators who for decades now have campaigned against irresponsible promotions.

Licensed trade organizations representing mainly the large brewers and multiple on-trade retailers, eg the British (and Scottish) Beer and Pub Association. (BBPA) take a different view.

They may condone the pub companies’ seasonal sales or the discounting of ales or lager to below £1.00/ pint. Elsewhere customers are encouraged to trade up to larger spirit and wine measures. Strong mood-altering drinks may be sold at less than the price of packaged water. Some pubcos may corner the market in this way on behalf of shareholders.

The new Licensing (Scotland) 2005 Act is powerless other than to ensuring staff training. Its power to end irresponsible promotions seems restricted to the prevention of happy hours via the 72 hour rule.

Some other factors incl Minimum Pricing

Legislation dictates that wine by the glass must only be offered in multiples of 12.5cls. (slightly too small) or 17.5cls. (just right) Result – most bars offer 17.5 and 25cls, (= one third of a bottle=too large!). Solution – legislate for a circa 20cls wine measure. Scotland’s special metric dispensation for spirits measured in 3.5cls. could be ready too for a reduction to 2.5cls.

Many late night bar/nightclub operators who charge admission of around £3/person offer strong alcoholic drinks at only £1 each. The effect on many young customers is to drink more in order to maximize value for money. The legality of this door entry format has been tested under the new Act and is still permitted.

The Scottish Grocers’ Federation and the Scottish Retail Consortium represent the licensed off-trade retailers including supermarkets, and appear to be comfortable with their members using alcoholic drinks as a loss-leader in order to attract customers to buy their entire weekly food shopping. The
Scotch Whisky Association and the large brewing companies seem to welcome the “pile ‘em high, sell ‘em cheap” attitude normally applied to commodities like soap or cereals. Solitary drinking and “pre-loading” at home are now the norm.

Large supermarket chains may even reclaim VAT on massive bulk orders of alcoholic liquor purchased as “a promotional expense”. The resultant downward pressure on the retail price of alcohol is therefore funded by the taxpayer along with the costs of resulting alcohol abuse.

The Portman Group (strap-line, “promoting sensible drinking”) is funded by the Drinks Industry and apparently exists only to find and highlight solutions for damage limitation to that industry’s social responsibility credentials.

The Advertising Industry requires government supervision too for the tasteless and shocking campaigns involving aggression, violence and sex in the marketing of RTDs ie alcopops. The TV ads show youths throwing furniture around a room (Blue Alcopop). Governments must not allow spirit manufacturers to promote the downing “in an instant” of strong, lurid sweet and sickly “shots” in adverts which appeal to our adolescents. Names like Stiffy’s Shots Cola Kubez may appeal to the wider audience but at what cost to our society?

Architects and Town Planners should be compelled to promote more homely, couthie and compact pub developments in place of the prevalent football pitch sized “drinking factories” where youths stand up to drink. (ie “vertical drinking”)

**Minimum pricing per unit of alcohol** would be of huge benefit. It could be perfectly targeted at the vulnerable 11-14 yr age group and if set at 60p/unit will be ideally weighted, increasing the off-sale cost of a 2ltr plastic bottle of 8% ABV cider from £3 to £6. Heavy drinking within older groups would be discouraged.

Moderate drinkers would see little difference and responsible bar operators and moderate customers would be unaffected as overheads dictate that prices are maintained at a socially acceptable level.

Education we need to have 18-21 yr old paid *surveillants* in the schools (*used successfully in France*) mentoring 11-14yr olds to respect the merits of enjoying a moderate social drink. By contrast, the miseries of alcohol misuse/abuse are made clear.

Closing times should remain unchanged. With seasonal extensions bars can stay open beyond midnight for up to 26 weeks/year.

Minimum age should stay the same, at least until some progress is made.

Those hearing my plea for common sense will accuse me of self-interest, driving up drinks prices in shops and bars. In reality all responsible publicans and on-trade licensees would face selling fewer drinks in order to promote social responsibility.
Publicans don’t want a few harmful drinkers possibly upsetting others in their hostelries. What we do want are many more customers who drink a little - and more often!

In the same way that light-touch regulation has failed in the economy, I fear that the same is true of our drinking culture.

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