

Alcohol Report: A Triumph of Human Reason over Primal Forces

Roger Kerr's disdainful dismissal (May 7th) of the Law Commission's magnificent report "Alcohol in our lives: curbing the harm" is of course entirely predictable. Roger Kerr is a spokesperson for "business". In this case it is the alcohol industry he is defending – an industry which, just like the primal tobacco industry before it, will fight to the death to maintain profits, even when that profit comes at the price of mayhem, suffering and death.

The only people likely to lose when the key recommendations from this monumental "tour de force" are put in place are those who peddle this drug. The industry's shareholders are likely to see the writing on the wall well in advance of the decline. Heavy drinkers and risky drinkers will reduce their intake with benefits for themselves, their families and the communities they live in, and low-risk drinkers will hardly notice any impact on their own drinking habits at all.

The Palmer report will be viewed in future decades as a document that changed New Zealand's history for the better. The government that enacts the key recommendations will be lauded in the history books as truly great leaders. In contrast, Mr Kerr and his friends will come to be viewed in similar fashion to the self-interested, amoral way tobacco industry heads are appropriately now judged. Remember, they used to be considered to be as respectable as the alcohol industry currently are, and have the same influence on the corridors of power that the alcohol industry still enjoys.

There are three policies that the alcohol industry fears the most. We know this because they've carefully outlined them in their own internal documents. These documents came to light following successful tobacco litigation - there are strong synergies between Big Booze and Big Tobacco. These three policies are tax increases on alcohol, restrictions on advertising of alcohol, and decreasing the blood alcohol concentration for legal driving. It is not surprising therefore that Mr Kerr has singled out the proposed increase in excise tax by the Law Commission for much of his vitriol.

According to the international evidence available, excise tax increases are the most effective method a government has at its disposal to reduce alcohol-related problems, with minimum pricing in place for optimal effectiveness. Mr Kerr knows the risk to the big businesses he represents and so has come out swinging.

Mr Kerr uses the familiar tactic of calling for more research and more analysis. His demand for a regulatory impact statement is simply a bid to stall the process. The tobacco industry used this tactic for decades while smokers died from tobacco related diseases in their droves. The alcohol industry will now play for time while New Zealand's heavy drinking culture continues to damage heavy drinkers as well as thousands of their innocent victims.

Mr Kerr has targeted excise tax increases. There are others working on persuading the government that more research is required before lowering the drink driving BAC levels,

despite the substantial extant body of research supporting a lowering to 0.05. And for the trifecta, behind the scenes industry lobbyists are working to maintain the right to tell white lies about alcohol through marketing and advertising. Marketing is the lynch pin in maintaining New Zealand's heavy drinking culture selling us stories about the importance of alcohol for a successful happy life, while avoiding any truthful health information on alcohol beverage containers, such as warning young women about the neurotoxic impact of alcohol on their un-born children throughout pregnancy.

Sir Geoffrey Palmer begins his strongly reasoned blueprint for change by referring to the “unbridled commercialisation” of alcohol. The government has a fundamental duty to curb excessive business activity involving all dangerous products that can cause great harm to its citizens – tobacco, gambling, and guns as well as alcohol.

There is a vast and growing number of ordinary New Zealanders, now waiting with considerable anticipation, the government's response to this extraordinary good report that contains the solutions to one of the most important social issues of our time.

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