

Turning a blind eye to boozed-up Britain

We're all in agreement then: binge drinking is unacceptable. But who are the nation's binge drinkers – and will the new licensing laws come anywhere near scratching the surface of the problem? Years of experience on both sides of the fence have made Norrie McKechnie somewhat sceptical.

Alcohol offending problems are going to increase whether the hours stay the same, open all night, or you closed them completely. The government seems to be trying to manage the problem rather than get to the source of it.

This is about ingrained attitudes and a society where being drunk, falling around and making a prat of yourself is considered funny, where you have radio DJs talking about getting 'lashed' and 'bladdered' at the weekends and laughing about it. Imagine if they made jokes about themselves injecting smack on live radio. You almost need a politically correct language to change people's conception of being drunk. Unfortunately children see parents drunk; it's on television constantly in advertising; it's cheap and available; and it sedates and kills inhibitions, bringing Dutch courage to today's insecure youth. It also brings aggression, rage, anger, hostility then violence, as we know only too well.

You get a clue into binge drinking problems when you look at the binge drinkers of the future, the children. At the moment they are binging on junk food, hence the problems with obesity. (Maybe they should open McDonalds and Kentucky Fried Chicken 24 hours, then the kids wouldn't binge as much.) But soon they will be experimenting with alcohol and various types of drugs and in the case of alcohol they will not only get the oral gratification associated

also with eating and smoking, but they will experience, probably for the first time in the lives, the sedative effects of alcohol. It's this sedative effect, combined with enhanced feelings of confidence and the reduction in inhibitions that makes alcohol so dangerous to many people.

What is suggested now is that very few pubs would open 24 hours, but instead open to perhaps 1am. That must be the worst possible scenario as regards binge drinking – and what is the point in having a bill that no-one is going to use? Most people I talk to, police and other workers, and even people not connected with the caring business, do not see the need for this bill, as most of the people who would want to be out at night are young drinkers.

One police inspector told me about an incident on Sky TV's *Booze Britain*. You had a group of young men sitting at a table, and a barman with a tank on his back, and in the tank was a mixture of drinks, very potent stuff. This barman was going round each lad in turn and spraying a powerful mixture into their open mouths. Like baby sparrows in a nest, the lads were getting massive amounts of alcohol into their system in one go, and were choking most of the time – this happened regularly during the evening. At the end of the evening, the bill was £800 between them. This sort of madness will still go on whatever opening times are. Is this your caring drinks industry?

This bill is not going to stop binge drinking, and will definitely worsen alcohol abuse generally, just as rigid measures have not cut down drug taking. Neither free reign nor imposing restrictions works with people, both are too extreme. Just look at the failed attempts encouraging people to stop using their cars, or the rise of mobile phones. They have woven them into the pattern of their lives; some of them would find it hard to stop, even if they wanted to.

Then there is the suggestion: 'be like the French and their café society'. The problem with that, is that a massive amount of French people suffer from 'delta alcoholism' – they drink regularly every day with control, but have an inability to abstain. The new word for this is 'normal alcoholism', and the crunch is that the French have one of the worst records of serious alcohol related liver problems in the world. So they die in their droves, but do it quietly and without offending and causing political waves. Is that what we want to be like, and admire? In Scotland, where hours are more relaxed than here, alcohol related deaths have doubled, 70 per cent of violent crime is alcohol related, and there has been a fivefold increase in hospital admissions due to alcohol illness.

Apart from the usual offending carnage of binge drinkers, there is a huge rise in 'civilised alcoholism' and it is showing up in my work already. A typical case of this is Mr and Mrs J. They both have full-time jobs and have never offended at any time; they have families and own their home. They would never for a second remotely consider themselves to have alcohol problems or be like those hooligan binge drinkers. They are not hooligans, but they drink more, or as much, as binge drinkers. They are part of a new civilised 'wine culture' brigade, who drink

wine every evening while making the dinner, and also during and after dinner. They are never very drunk and rarely take time off work. They don't fight or vomit in the street, but on average they drink over 100 units a week.

They have convinced themselves wine has no alcohol in it, and only look on going out to the pub (which they do over and above the wine) as having a drink. Mrs J is drinking nine times over the safe limit for women every week, and it's beginning to show, but she never blames the alcohol. There are nine units in one bottle of wine, so even just one bottle a night

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would be 63 units a week, which is still four times the safe limit for women. This pattern is being repeated up and down the country in millions of homes and has already started to cause major health concerns, especially with women's liver problems. This again will cost a fortune to the health service.

There are always going to be people that drink too much, eat too much, and watch television too much, so it's naïve to think everyone who drinks is capable of making informed and proper judgements on their drinking habits. A great majority of the people that come to our service do so because they find it very difficult to stop drinking once they start, and I am not just talking about chronic alcoholics. This compulsion, and inability to only have one or two drinks are the dynamics behind binge drinking. The pubs and homes are the theatres in which it's played out.

I never realised how passionate I felt about 24-hour opening, and the sadness generally about the lack of funding for community based alcohol abuse projects. Doing our work is like trying to move a ton of coal with a spoon, and the more we move, the bigger the pile gets.

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