

KELVIN THOMSON MP
Federal Member for Wills
ADJOURNMENT
Alcohol Abuse

House of Representatives 19/03/08

Mr. KELVIN THOMSON (Wills) (7.45 p.m.)—I welcome the announcement by the federal Labor government of a national strategy to tackle the epidemic of binge drinking which is afflicting young Australians. Many of us have had drunken escapades in our youth that we could report on in some detail. I am certainly no wowsler, but I am concerned at what clearly strikes me as an increasing incidence over the years of binge drinking amongst young people, with all its attendant consequences of violence and harmful health impacts on young people.

The medical evidence supports my gut instincts. The 2005 Australian Secondary Students Alcohol and Drug Survey found that every week around one in 10 12- to 17-year-olds reported binge drinking or drinking at risky levels, which the report defined as seven or more drinks for males and five or more drinks for females. For 16- and 17-year-olds, one in five drank at risky levels. I repeat: one in five. Keep in mind that our drinking laws suggest we do not think people under 18 should be drinking at all. I welcome the announcement that the federal government will implement three new measures to help reduce alcohol misuse and binge drinking: first, \$14 million in community-level initiatives to confront the culture of binge drinking, particularly in sporting organisations; second, \$19 million to assist young people to assume personal responsibility for their drinking; and, third, \$20 million for an advertising campaign to confront young people with the costs and consequences of binge drinking. This is a good start.

I want to suggest to the federal government—and, indeed, to the state and local governments, which have a far more direct role in these matters—that a key element of tackling binge drinking lies in restricting the opening hours of nightclubs and other drinking outlets. In my own city of Melbourne, particularly in the CBD, in recent years we have seen a plethora of outlets opening beyond three in the morning. When I was a youngster, Melbourne had six o'clock closing. Then we moved to 10 pm. Later on, you could find pubs that opened until midnight. I think that is perfectly reasonable. But the *Herald Sun*, which, to its credit, has done a lot of work on this issue, reported in June and July last year that in Melbourne's CBD there were 146 premises with permits to serve alcohol to 3 am or beyond. The number of licences issued to serve alcohol beyond 3 am had risen by 43 per cent in just five years. This has been associated with rising levels of drunkenness and assaults, an increase in noise complaints to the council and police and, on anecdotal evidence, CBD residents moving away as the proliferation of licensed venues has made the area unsafe. I do not have the time to give the House chapter and verse on the violence associated with all-night drinking, but in June last year Melbourne people were disgusted when a gunman left a King Street nightclub at about 8 am, attacked a woman and shot dead a male good Samaritan who sought to come to her rescue.

I am also aware of a 1997 study undertaken in the city of Perth by the National Centre for Research into the Prevention of Drug Abuse. A total of 75 hotels, taverns and nightclubs were allowed to trade for longer hours between 1989 and 1996. The study showed that the average amount of alcohol purchased from such premises was more than 85 per cent greater than that from ordinary-hours

drinking outlets. The premises with later trading also had significant increases in assaults in the vicinity and were associated with more road crashes and more drink-driving offences, all of which impose costs on police and emergency services—to say nothing of the human tragedies involved. The three key features of far too many nightclubs and extended-trading premises are binge drinking, drug taking and violent assaults. The increase in venues operating from midnight right through till daylight represents a recipe for the proliferation of binge drinking, drug taking, and alcohol and drug related violent crime. These hours of operation threaten the safety of third parties, such as taxi drivers and even innocent bystanders.

I know some measures have been undertaken, but I encourage our federal, state and local governments to explore policy options to make late-night venues more accountable when problems occur. This could include licence conditions which result in licences being forfeited when illegal activity takes place in a venue or if patrons indulge in such activity in or around a licensed venue. Some of these venues are clearly out of control. I think the issuing of such a plethora of all-night licences has been unfortunate. I would like to see some of these licences revoked, and those venues which fail to control their patrons are the obvious places to start.

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