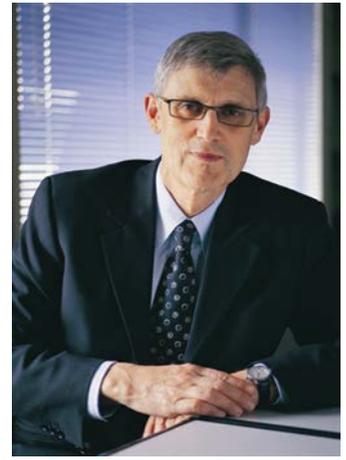


# Reflections on the heavy drinking culture of New Zealand

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A mistake was made 30 years ago with the Sale and Supply of Alcohol Act (1989); a new liberalizing alcohol act right in line with the economic revolution sweeping across the Western World at the time, championed by the UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and US President Ronald Regan – neo-liberalism.

Here in New Zealand Roger Douglas, the Finance Minister of David Lange's 4th Labour government spearheaded radical changes to the economy doing away with a lot of "unnecessary regulation", including alcohol regulation. NZ neoliberalism was termed "Rogernomics" and later by the more pejorative term "Ruthanasia" when Ruth Richardson was Finance Minister of the next National government and brought in major cuts to social benefits with her "Mother of All Budgets", working closely with Jenny Shipley at the time. Shipley in time became PM and in 1999 oversaw the extension of supermarket alcohol (superconvenient) with the introduction of beer as well as wine, and to cap off the liberalization of alcohol she facilitated the dropping of the purchase age of alcohol from 20 to 18 years, bringing fresh life to teenage drinking and a deepening of a heavy youth drinking culture.

Alcohol liberalization was aided by a report by George Laking several years previously which ignored the evidence existing at the time that increasing availability of alcohol increases its use and therefore its harm. Ideology trumped the science. We were coaxed into thinking that it was a good thing for alcohol to be normalized; and that in so doing New Zealand was on its way to become a sophisticated country like France. The fact that France had one of the highest rates of cirrhosis of the liver at the time was quietly ignored. There was money to be made out of our favourite recreational drug and big business was ready to rumble (as it is now with cannabis). Besides, per capita consumption of alcohol in New Zealand had begun to decline from 1978, due at least in part to the beginning of drink driving campaigns. The neo-liberal reforms arrested this worrying trend for alcohol company bosses and alcohol industry shareholders of falling per capita consumption of alcohol.

The liberalizing alcohol reforms (brought in by both Labour and National) were in fact so successful that over the next decade through to the global financial crisis of 2008/9 per capita consumption in New Zealand increased by 10% as marketing of alcohol, to women and young people in particular, took hold, and progressively cheaper alcohol became available as supermarkets used it as loss-leading bait to get customers into their stores. More alcohol, more harm; and it was in the context of this increasing

alcohol harm, especially following the violent murder of South Auckland liquor store owner Navtej Singh in June 2008, that the Labour government of the time instituted a major review of the liquor laws.

The review was undertaken by the Law Commission, the most extensive review of alcohol in New Zealand's history. Major reforms were recommended (along with a plethora of minor recommendations as well). But the National-led government decided to play a deceptive political game of pretending they were taking the review and its bold recommendations seriously, but in fact engineered a cynical response by passing an Alcohol Reform Bill, which contained no substantial alcohol reforms. Highlights of this political game are as follows.

First, they set a scene of low expectations by suggesting New Zealanders weren't wanting major reform and declared it would be unfair on "responsible citizens" if the government brought in major changes. Increasing the price of alcohol was casually dismissed by Prime Minister John Key before the Law Commission had even reported.

Second, the government made a lot of the fact they were adopting a majority (126 in full or in part) of the Law Commission's recommendations (153) but never acknowledged they ignored the major recommendations related to dismantling alcohol marketing, increasing the price, or leading change in reducing accessibility of alcohol; the recommendations that would've made a significant difference.

Third, there were a lot of political time games played. The government initially delayed introducing new legislation by over 18 months after hurrying up the Law Commission to produce its final report. They then timed submissions on the new bill to coincide with Christmas/New Year, delayed the 2nd Reading of the new bill until one month before the general election, and introduced further delays in passing legislation.

Fourth was arguably the biggest scandal. Peter Dunne, Associate Minister of Health with responsibility for alcohol policy, withheld the results of a high quality Health Sponsorship Council survey that showed majority support for substantial alcohol reform in

contradiction to the government's rhetoric about the public not wanting major changes.

Fifth, the government quickly dismissed 22 Supplementary Order papers, and then using the conscience vote in Parliament and an unusual two-stage voting process to see off any change to the purchase age even though a majority of MPs indicated they wanted it changed.

Finally, the government had the gall to announce that the new "Alcohol NON-Reform Bill" was a great success. Perhaps it was a great success for the government's sponsors in the alcohol industry – good job done!, heavy drinking culture intact, money will continue to pour into the coffers – but the health and well-being of ordinary NZ citizens continues to be put at risk through the national drug-using pastime of heavy drinking.

The National-led government had dealt with the latest threat to the profitable heavy drinking culture not continuing, but decided to take further action to keep alcohol reform at bay. They duly knocked the Alcohol Advisory Council (ALAC) on the head, and buried it into a newly formed Health Promotion Agency (HPA), with a Board that steered the organization towards individually-based health promotion (individual responsibility) and away from population-based health promotion (government responsibility). In contrast to

ALAC which frequently made public comments about the need for scientifically supported population-based interventions, including "the big three" – marketing, pricing and accessibility – not a squeak has been heard from the HPA on the need for substantial new regulations on alcohol since its inception in 2012.

There have been many efforts to right the harms unleashed by excessive neoliberal reform of alcohol regulations, and some small success has been achieved. Instituting a zero limit for drink driving for teenagers has probably been a factor in youth hazardous drinking rates dropping a little, and a lowering of the adult drink driving limits from 0.08mg/dL to 0.05mg/dL has probably helped a little as well; but as has been said previously, it probably requires two or three major reforms acting in synergy to have a substantial impact on heavy drinking in New Zealand.

Most recently, it has been very disappointing to hear senior members of the new Labour-led coalition government (Jacinda Aderm and Andrew Little) put the chill on considering what to do about the continuing normalized alcohol crisis. In the short-term we can only hope the Tax Working Group and Mental Health & Addiction Inquiry Team make strong recommendations for alcohol reform that convince the government to be brave and act in the public's interest.

