

Alcohol in Australia: a history of drinking

ABC Rear Vision

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Australians have enjoyed a drink since the first days of white settlement. On Rear Vision this week, a history of drinking in Australia and of government attempts to control it.

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Keri Phillips: Time to raise your glass to another edition of Rear Vision, here on ABC Radio National. I'm Keri Phillips.

Joe Hockey: Isn't your alcopop tax just a tax grab? It does nothing about binge drinking, given that the major competitor to an alcopop is taxed at half the rate, and has twice the amount of alcohol.

Nicola Roxon: This excise change will reduce consumption in 2008 -

Speaker: The Member for Goldstein.

Nicola Roxon: - 2009 by 43-million bottles in one year. This figure rises to 55-million bottles per year by the time we get to 2011-2012 ...

Keri Phillips: Rowdy times in Federal parliament in May, over government plans to increase the tax on ready mixed drinks, so-called alcopops, a reaction to apparent public concern over binge drinking by young people.

The consumption of alcohol in Australia has followed a V-shaped curve, beginning at a high point of 13 to 14 litres of pure alcohol per head per year at the turn of the 19th century, declining to a nadir in the early 1930s and then climbing back to a high point during the 1980s.

Today on Rear Vision we'll look at the reasons for this fluctuation, at the role played by government policy, and also and perhaps most interestingly, at the history of the way we drink.

Reporter: Staff at this bar in Newtown in inner-city Sydney told 'AM' these pre-mixed alcoholic drinks, or alcopops, as they're commonly known, are the biggest sellers among young women aged about 18 to 21.

Woman: Probably because they have the highest percentage of alcohol. Like if you get a Smirnoff Black it's two standard drinks in one bottle.

Reporter: So it is in an attempt to get drunk the quickest way possible?

Woman: Yes.

Reporter: And does it work?

Woman: Yes.

Keri Phillips: Alcohol arrived in Australia with the First Fleet. Richard Midford is Associate Professor at the National Drug Research Institute, Curtin University of Technology in Perth.

Richard Midford: I think we live with this romantic legend of Australian camaraderie and wrapped up in that is drinking, and that goes right back to the First Fleet, and there's some really interesting stories about drunken debauchery on the first day of settlement. And then from then, as Australia developed and moved into the bush, alcohol really played a sort of a part in terms of the limited recreation opportunities that were available to people in a very isolated situation. In Sydney, there were a lot of grog shops; in the bush, there weren't that many leisure facilities I guess in colonial Australia, so alcohol played a part in terms of being available and being a source of solace and recreation for people in isolated situations. And the literature that developed in the 19th century certainly featured alcohol as part of this legend of mateship and camaraderie and people pulling together in difficult circumstances and celebrating and enjoying life with alcohol.

Keri Phillips: Milton Lewis is a historian of medicine and public health at the Australian Health Policy Institute at the University of Sydney. He's also the author of a book called 'A Rum State: Alcohol and State Policy in Australia'.

Milton Lewis: We have a vision of ourselves as a very heavy drinking country from the very beginning, from the earliest colonial years. But in fact if we look at the per capita consumption and correct for the fact that there was a high so-called masculinity - there were a lot of men, soldiers, there were convicts and there were mainly male convicts and so on, and they were the big drinkers, and then we compare it with very comparable countries like the UK, Britain, and the United States, we see that we're very, very similar. It was certainly heavy per capita consumption compared with today, probably almost double, 13 to 14 litres of alcohol, pure alcohol, per head. But that's about the same level as you'd find in the UK about 1800, so it gets it into perspective, and that that legend's a bit exaggerated.

On the other hand, a lot of historians, and I think other people do acknowledge, that we were pretty good at binge drinking. The tradition of the bushman working hard for long periods, getting his cheque and then blowing the lot in one go, or most of it, in a local pub or inn, is pretty accurate I think. So that style of drinking as opposed to the per capita consumption, that view of the style of drinking is true.

Keri Phillips: In the early 19th century, Temperance organisations sprang up in the English speaking world, and they were active in all the Australian colonies from the 1830s. Initially they advocated the temperate or moderate use of alcohol, but ultimately they would demand its prohibition.

Milton Lewis: I think it can be seen, or one way to look at it is a reaction, particularly in the middle classes, to the tremendous upsurge in popular drinking, lower-class drinking particularly, of spirits. There's the famous gin epidemic in England, you know, 'Drunk for a penny, dead drunk for tuppence' and this has to do with the greater production, a more sort of industrialised production of distilled spirits generally. But it alarms the middle-class, it outrages them, it's morally and indeed politically unacceptable, the working-class is more

dangerous, if you like, when it's drunk. And you get a movement that grows stronger and stronger throughout the 19th century, this Temperance. It's very much affiliated with the Christian churches, particularly the Nonconformist churches and Evangelical Anglicanism. The Catholic church, except perhaps in Ireland is not as much concerned with these issues, but it starts off as an individual focused movement, saying to the individual 'Reform yourself, get a hold of yourself for the benefit of you and your family, get your morals and your behaviour right.' And this has quite a large impact, in fact a lot of people I should have mentioned earlier when I was talking about consumption, consumption goes down in the three countries I've mentioned, quite dramatically in the course of the 19th century, from this very high at the end of the 18th, beginning of the 19th, it goes down very dramatically. In the United States where it's perhaps most dramatic, it goes from about 13, 14 litres of alcohol, pure alcohol per head, to about 3-1/2 litres, and that's a tremendous fall.

Richard Midford: I think as we industrialise and as we suburbanise, the role that alcohol played changed. The free spirit tramping the bush, that is the stuff of Australian legends, really changed, because we basically developed an industrial suburban culture towards the end of the 19th century, and society wasn't prepared to tolerate the excesses that went with heavy alcohol consumption. At the same time that there was a sort of a popular movement against alcohol, that created a backlash, and the term arose, popularised by poets such as C.J. Denis, and the term was 'wowsers', and the term implies that it's a person who's against the pleasure of others and part of that pleasure of course was the use of alcohol. So they labelled them 'wowsers' and it's an interesting sort of way that Australians have handled it, because it was quite a humorous strategy that didn't tackle the issue head-on, that made mock of it, I guess.

Keri Phillips: The wowsers appeared to have the upper hand as governments became responsive to their concerns.

Milton Lewis: I said a little earlier that temperance began as something focused on the individual and it remained concerned with individual behaviour, but in the later part of the 19th century here, as indeed in the UK, you get temperance starting to come into the public policy area if you like. It gets very concerned with licensing provisions, and indeed is quite successful in influencing colonial governments here and the UK government in Britain and so on, with trying to restrict consumption essentially, by cutting back on hours of access, the opening hours of pubs, and by trying to cut back on the number of establishments, because what actually happened there was a tremendous proliferation of retailers, if you like, of pubs, and inns and so on, selling grog. So those two prongs became very important, and a thing called local option developed. This was, under the law, this was the ability to get a local vote on new licenses, licenses coming up for new establishments, but also to close existing establishments, so a real tussle developed, a very, very powerful tussle developed between the so-called drink industry, or the alcoholic beverages industry on the one hand and the temperance side. And it had a powerful popular support, which remained quite strong into the early 20th century.

Keri Phillips: The high water mark for the temperance movement in Australia was the imposition of 6 o'clock closing during the First World War, although it had more success in the US where the manufacture and sale of alcohol were banned nationally from 1920 to 1933. Here in Australia drinking declined to a low point of 2 or 3 litres per head per year in the early 1930s, largely due to the Depression. Following the end of the Second World War

however, consumption began to climb again as growing prosperity and cultural changes, particularly in the role of women, began to alter the way we drank.

Milton Lewis: You get a lot of talk about the need for 'civilised drinking', you know, to educate people, educate Australians not to be downing their grog at the Six O'clock Swill, not that everybody did of course, but to drink with meals, to drink moderately and so on, and also wine is coming in. By the 1960s particularly through our invention, the wine cask, one of our great Australian contributions to technology, wine becomes an unprecedentedly popular drink. I mean beer of course continues to be important, but probably for the first time, for a large number of people, wine becomes an important drink, and you get all this change coming. And at the same time, partly I think it's an interactive process because governments wouldn't lead on this without some indication that popular opinion was with them, but from the end of the 1950s and into the 1960s you get in various States, inquiries into the liquor licensing laws and the result of that is a tremendous liberalising of the hours, of the attempt to make more pleasant environments etc., and you get this general liberalisation of access to alcohol. So much so, that by, for example in New South Wales, by what? the late 1980s with the Greiner government, you get talk about 24-hour licences. It was part of a larger market-oriented philosophy that was very strong of course as we all know, in the '80s, and that small business should be deregulated, it wasn't just alcohol of course, it was general business, hours of access and so on.

SONG: Chumbawamba *Tubthumping*

Keri Phillips: In the post-war period, excessive alcohol consumption became not so much an individual moral matter but a public health issue as governments started to consider whole populations.

Milton Lewis: The focus had been strongly in the immediate post-war period on identifying alcoholics, and treating them. It was a clinical focus and it was saying - and it's true in one sense from a health point of view, the most badly affected - but the epidemiologists started to say, 'But we need to look at people who are not necessarily alcoholics or in danger of becoming so, because harm can be done even with lesser involvement with alcohol.' And things like traffic accidents etc. obviously evidence was emerging in that area too, about how often alcohol is associated with that, and with violence more generally. So from this perspective the Public Health people, and this got taken up at WHO as policy, started to talk about a population approach, the things that could be done at that general level, not intervening so much, although we continued to do that, with the individual casualties. And they said, 'Well things can be done, things can be done to cut back consumption', a bit like Temperance itself said. But not with this moralistic, they were very careful to differentiate themselves from this moral judgement stuff, and so no, this was scientific. If you raise taxes, taxes had always being levied, but for the purpose of government revenue, but if you raise taxes you could dissuade people, of course, you know, things are more expensive, they're not going to buy as much, or they're not going to buy it at all. So they started to talk about things that could be done at that more general policy level, and it got taken up around the world, including in Australia. The whole idea of a population approach became very popular from about the 1980s onwards, and you see I guess the ultimate expression of it in the development in the 1980s, the later 1980s, of a national alcohol policy in Australia, and indeed you see that happening across the world in developed countries anyway.

The development of that is quite interesting in itself, because you can see again the conflicts between various interests. In this case no longer Temperance, but health advocates, particularly these population-based advocacies, and of course legitimate business interests, whether it be the winemakers or whatever, and so that struggle probably is with us forever.

Keri Phillips: At the same time in Australia, consumption of alcohol had climbed steadily to peak in the mid 1980s at 9-1/2 to 10 litres of pure alcohol per adult per year. Despite the introduction of more liberal trading hours, consumption then began a slow decline to a plateau of 8-1/2 to 9 litres, and that's held pretty steady over this decade. Where does that put Australia on the global drinking league tables?

Professor Robin Room is the Chair of Social Research in Alcohol at the School of Population Health at the University of Melbourne.

Robin Room: Well if you look across the industrial, you know the developed countries generally, then Australia's sort of in the middle of the pack, and it's more or less in the middle of the pack for English-speaking countries also. The other thing to say about that of course is the developed world drinks a whole lot more than the developing world where there are a lot more abstainers and people are much poorer, and can't afford alcohol. Britain seems to have had set of things that happened around particularly young people's drinking, but I don't think limited to young people's drinking, it's just that that's mostly what there's attention to in the media. A lot of things came together that had to do with essentially the removal of restrictions that people didn't realise had any purpose to them. In the Thatcher era for instance, it changed so that you could change a restaurant into a pub without having to get permission from anyone, sort of routinely, and they also, the Monopolies Commission, forced the breweries to sell off their chains of pubs to a new breed of corporation called Pubcos, that didn't have a memory of the troubles from the Temperance movement that the brewers had, and which have acted much more aggressively on the market. Also I think they cracked down on raves and youth drug use that pushed young people back into nightclubs and so forth, and the alcohol industry actually noted the attraction of club drugs and so forth, and you can see that the way that they marketed their ready-to-drinks and so forth, with very colourful labels and colourful liquids, essentially was reminding young people that alcohol was a drug essentially.

Keri Phillips: Given Australia's alcohol consumption has remained steady for the past decade, why does it dominate the front pages of our newspapers? Richard Midford.

Richard Midford: If you look back, I mean the '80s and '90s, I think we as a society were very concerned about illegal drug use, so that the sort of stories that got into the media were people getting into trouble, people dying, people getting sick, people having accidents etc, because of their illegal drug use. Whereas that was all happening with alcohol to a far greater extent, but it didn't enter Australian consciousness to the same extent, because it didn't rate in the media. Whereas I think these days that there is much more awareness that alcohol is the drug that causes our young people the most problems. And there are media stories around it, so the people are more aware of it.

News Reader: A peak body representing spirit manufacturers says sales figures show the Federal government's tax increase on alcopops has led to more dangerous drinking behaviour. The Distilled Spirits Industry Council says the latest figures show sales of pre-mixed alcoholic drinks have fallen by almost 40% since last month's tax increase. But sales of

bottles of pure spirits have increased by about 20%. Councillor Steve Riden says that means more people are mixing their drinks themselves.

Steve Riden: That has increased the danger because people don't know what they're drinking. Across the drinking occasion, people pour heavier and heavier measures and we think that a lot of people are going to be drinking more than they intended to.

Keri Phillips: Here in Australia, the Federal government has chosen to increase the taxes on one particular form of alcohol, so-called alcopops. What effect might a tax increase have on consumption?

Richard Midford: Consumption of alcohol is price sensitive. If you increase the price, consumption is likely to go down, and certainly as our incomes have gone up, alcohol hasn't gone up to the same extent. So there is more money available to drink alcohol. The thing with alcohol though is some beverages are cheaper than others, because there's not uniform taxation on alcohol, and what happens of course is that some beverages, the cheaper beverages, cause a disproportionate amount of harm. And I think the government needs to look at that. The tax on beer is at a particular level, the tax on spirits because they were seen as more harmful, is higher, but the tax on wine is very low, so that cheap cask wine, the tax that's imposed per standard drink is really a lot less than the tax that's imposed on spirits per standard drink. So that if you want to get bang for your buck, if you want to drink to get drunk, you wouldn't be drinking spirits, you'd be drinking wine.

Ready-to-drink alcopops have always been quite expensive, and my sense is that they get drunk in particular circumstances. They're a prestige alcohol product for young people and they tend to get drunk at special occasions, at prestige occasions when people want to make a particular statement about themselves. But young people also know very clearly that wine is the cheapest way to get drunk, and I mean if you talk to young people they will talk about drinking 'goon' if they want to get drunk, because it's cheap. If they increase the price of one alcohol product, it's very easy to then substitute it with another. I think that if the government's serious about taxing alcohol in terms of tackling the public health issue, trying to come up with a tax regime that has public health benefits, that tax regime needs to be uniform across alcohol, and it needs to tax alcohol, i.e. irrespective of the beverage that it's in, so that if you have a standard drink of spirits, or a standard drink of wine, or a standard drink of beer, you're paying the same amount of tax so that you can't really move from one to the other to get cheaper alcohol.

Robin Room: The prices will make some difference, but taxes and prices are not a single measure that's going to be the magic bullet that's going to cause all our alcohol problems to go away. It's something that's part of a larger strategy, essentially. And it's also true that of course if you're thinking in terms of on premise consumption, that is people drinking in pubs or restaurants, the taxes are a relatively small part of the price, because mostly what you're paying for is the service essentially of whoever's serving it, and the space that you're occupying and so forth - the rent on your bar-stool. The taxes would have a bigger effect on purchases for off-premises consumption because they're a more substantial part of the price thing.

Keri Phillips: There are many ways of reducing the consumption of alcohol apart from increasing its price. In the US, where the drinking culture was forever changed by Prohibition, the drinking age was raised to 21 in the 1980s.

Robin Room: There's two things to say about that. One of them is that the research literature is very clear. It had an effect particularly on drink-driving casualties, and you can see the same thing happening when they lowered the drinking age in New Zealand more recently, and there's no question that if you want to reduce rates of teenage deaths from drink driving, then raising the drinking age is a good way of doing it. There's no question that it accomplishes that. You then have to ask the second question of Well, most people in Australia even at this point, start drinking before it's legal for them to be drinking. So how much of an illegal culture around alcohol and the initiation of alcohol consumption do you want to have? Raising the drinking age is not going to change the fact that most people start drinking illegally anyway, but they'll be doing it for longer, essentially. And so there's a need for some thought and discussion about again what kind of society do we want to have? And what is the advice to parents around introducing their children to drinking? But you know, there's a lot of ideology involved in that; rather little evidence and the evidence doesn't always go the way that people imagine it will.

Richard Midford: Well it's a difficult thing to recommend particular techniques because what works in one country, doesn't necessarily work in another, and it's a really good issue to maybe finish on. If you compare us say to Italy: now Italy has a drinking age of 16. And they not only consume less alcohol than us, but they have a lot less problems among their young people, and that's not because of official intervention, they actually have a fairly non-interventionist government in the alcohol area. It's because their culture is very against being out of control when you're drunk. So that it's a real no-no to binge drink and to be drunk, so that they don't have those sorts of problems. And it's not about regulation, it's about really culture that they are immersed in. And I think what we do in Australia really needs to take into consideration our culture. We can't just pick a strategy from another culture and say Oh, it works there, we should do that and it'll work here.

I did some research on leaver celebrations a few years ago and when we were asking the students about what they were planning to do and what they wanted to get out of the school leaver celebrations, two things really stood out, which was they wanted to sort of mix and socialise with other school leavers, and they wanted to drink a lot. Well when we asked them subsequently what they really enjoyed about their experience, drinking didn't feature, it was the socialising, and there was this sort of theme, 'Well I could have actually had a better time if I wasn't so drunk.'

Keri Phillips: Richard Midford from the National Drug Research Institute at Curtin University of Technology. We also heard from historian Milton Lewis, author of 'A rum state: alcohol and state policy in Australia', and Professor Robin Room from the University of Melbourne.

Jenny Parsonage is the sound engineer for Rear Vision. I'm Keri Phillips.

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