

St John's Residents' Association

Comments on the NAHRS Consultation Document of October 2002

This Association covers an area of Clifton, Bristol, close to the part of Whiteladies Road which has now become known as 'The Strip'. In the past few years, the high concentration of alcohol sales centres here has produced an unwelcome and unsavoury concentration of drunkenness, violence and abusive behaviour. Our members are thus keenly aware of the harm caused by alcohol to them and to their previously peaceful and orderly neighbourhood.

Your survey is therefore extremely welcome, though extraordinarily ill-timed, since the government is about to bring a Bill to Parliament on the reform of the licensing laws which shows every sign of having been dictated by the large brewing interests, and which cannot fail to increase liquor sales and thus make the problems associated with drunkenness substantially worse. Indeed, the various departments of government show very little sign of talking to each other about the alcohol problem, and no sign whatever of 'joined-up government'.

We cannot attempt to answer all 61 of your questions, but we can offer the following comments on some of them:

Q.1: Alcohol is a drug like heroine or nicotine, less addictive but more widespread, and the reasons for government intervention are the same, when misuse becomes injurious to the individual or to society.

Q.2: As above, when the effects are injurious to one or to many.

Q.3: No-one questions the right of the individual to quiet enjoyment, if it is not injurious to himself, but enjoyment which involves interrupting the enjoyment of others needs intervention.

Q.4: The responsibility of commercial interests is, as always, to the shareholder, and until this fundamental flaw in capitalism is rectified, one can expect no help there. Consumers are responsible for their own well-being, and should be expected to be considerate of the well-being of others, as long as they are capable of rational decision, which is not for long, usually. If 'voluntary groups' means temperance groups and AA, they are worthy but of limited effect; and the only people left are the voluntary associations of citizens seeking to protect the amenity of their cities and neighbourhoods: they have a significant part to play.

Q.5: the first and vitally important principle, in the long term, is to curb the influence of the alcohol advertisers, and to engender instead an adult belief among the population that drink is enjoyable in moderation but harmful to oneself and others in excess: in a word, a belief in temperance. Our national attitude to drink - among the young, at least - is so woefully different from that in grown-up countries that we have a long way to go, but there is no reason whatsoever (apart from a craven and misguided fear of losing votes) why the government cannot start now on a campaign like the drink-driving campaign and the non-smoking campaign, to try to persuade our young people that drunkenness is not acceptable.

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Q.8: there is an impression that a combination of surplus income and boredom is responsible for much of the excessive drinking. It may even be that the present disenchantment with politics and politicians, and despair at seeing the House of Commons treated as it now is, is responsible for some of the present problems.

Q.9: we don't need to worry about the Moslems, at least. Sadly, one feels far safer and far less surrounded by mindless violence in most Moslem countries than here. How does one achieve that degree of sobriety without enforcing abstinence? Young women are at present enjoying and exploiting their new-found freedom, diligently fed by the advertising industry and TV serials. Any attempt to curb these would of course be greeted with fury as an infringement of liberty. Sooner or later, though, we shall have to distinguish between liberty and license.

Q.10: obviously, the quiet country pub is a valuable social centre - one of the few left in a countryside which has lost or is losing most of its shops and post offices in the name of urban efficiency.

Q.11: sadly, yes, and it looks nasty.

Q.12: the most relevant factors, I think, are fashion and marketing. Family background may encourage temperate behaviour by example, or lead to excess as a reaction; the other factors are probably of minor importance. Certainly the behaviour of students suggests that education has no great influence.

Q.13: probably adversely, among those (like young women) who smoke and drink through bravado, to show their indifference to the risks.

The remaining questions are more specialised, and we leave them to the specialists to answer. In particular, there have been many surveys on the effects of drink on health and on the NHS, and on the anti-social behaviour brought about by drink. There is much evidence on these matters which has been accumulated by bodies such as the Institute of Alcohol Studies and Alcohol Concern, and they will doubtless be responding at length. Our own experience is in observing the adverse effects of alcoholic excess on the behaviour of the young in particular, and the consequent adverse effects on the quality of life in residential neighbourhoods, and we welcome your enquiry. Would that the DCMS showed a similar concern.

Yours faithfully,

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