

»»*The war on alcohol
has begun.*««

EDITORIAL

BY JOEL B. PAYNE

Can higher alcohol prices realistically reduce binge drinking? Apparently researchers from the University of Sheffield have found evidence to suggest that price does have a significant effect on reducing demand for alcohol, which has moved some politicians – and not only in Britain – to push for a minimum price on a unit of alcohol.

According to Dr Petra Meier, who led the study, “evidence shows that a 10% price increase is associated with a 4% to 8% reduction in consumption.” That, though, would certainly only be true if there were no adequate alternative at the old price. Obviously, in such a brave new world, a 100% increase would have an even more significant impact.

The industry would also love to see prices increase if they were coupled with consumers drinking higher quality wines. None of them truly enjoy doing what it takes to meet the £3.99 price point. Mandating higher quality, however, is not the way the market works, nor what the politicians have in mind. Lurking behind the health issue is a money grab, a gimmick to raise duties on wine to support other pet causes, but behind the smoke screen, it is also the beginning of a war on alcohol.

In Australia health experts have called on industry to take greater responsibility for the problems caused by alcohol misuse, but finding a solution to the problem requires governments, communities and the industry to work together. However, the coalition there favours the introduction not only of volumetric taxation and minimum prices for alcohol, but also an end to the current self-regulatory advertising system and the establishment of an independent body with powers to sanction.

In France, the mere mention of an alcoholic product by name is, according to the current legal definition, considered publicity and thus forbidden, which means that all wine sites on the Internet there are by letter of the law illegal. In the same vein, Spain modified its criminal code last year, making driving with excessive blood alcohol a crime punishable with up to six months in jail.

Interestingly, though, the countries with the highest duties have the greatest problems with alcohol. In Germany, which has no taxes on still wines, 23% of all wine costs less than €1 a bottle and yet there is little mention in the press of heavy drinking. Nor in Italy, where wine remains the country’s drink of choice.

These discrepancies make it clear that we are dealing with complex problems in the social fabric of different cultures that cannot be reduced to the misuse of wine, but alcohol makes an attractive target. We’re a far cry from Winston Churchill’s love affair with Champagne and cigars. Tobacco is already under attack. The war on alcohol has begun.

