

Binge drinking nothing to celebrate

Victoria's liquor laws are considered the most liberal in the country with 20 years of deregulation underpinning Melbourne's vibrant restaurant and bar culture.

Yet, questions are now being asked about whether the state is still enjoying the social and economic growth the licensing reforms promised, amid claims they have also spawned an ugly binge-drinking culture.

Police, health authorities and politicians are currently engaged in a debate about how to curb the rise in vicious assaults and riots erupting outside city clubs and bars.

Since the late 1980s, the number of liquor outlets has leapt from 3500 to upwards of 17,000.

Assaults on Melbourne's streets are up 17 per cent over 12 months and Victoria's rate of alcohol-attributable hospital visits is now three times the national average, up 27 per cent in the five years to 2003-04. This is despite alcohol consumption per capita not rising significantly.

The architect of Victoria's liquor reforms in the 80s, Monash Professor John Nieuwenhuysen, was recently reported as saying the reforms were designed to promote a civilised, European approach to drinking, not the development of "beer barns" where 24-hour trading is the norm and drunk patrons spill onto the city's streets in big numbers.

July 2008

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Professor Nieuwenhuysen blames bad planning laws, not the liquor licensing laws, for the "alcohol fuelled anarchy" confronting police and the wider community today.

He said one of his key recommendations – specific measures to counter alcohol abuse – was ignored by successive state governments.

In December, the Brumby government responded by introducing changes to the Liquor Control Reform Act (1998) in a bid to quell alcohol-linked violence. The new laws allow troublemakers to be banned from entertainment precincts for 24 hours and give police the power to suspend a licensee's licence if violence is occurring or public safety is threatened in his premises.

Police or prosecutors can apply for a court order to exclude a person for up to 12 months from an entertainment precinct, or a licensed venue within a designated precinct.

The director of Liquor Licensing was also given more power to suspend licences or vary trading hours and the maximum penalty for supplying liquor to a drunk person, or allowing drunken or disorderly patrons into a licensed venue, was increased to more than \$13,000.

Other changes include a ban on inappropriate advertising or promotions which encourage irresponsible drinking, while cafes and restaurants operating as bars or nightclubs late at night are required to have appropriate security.

More information

Useful web link

www.consumer.vic.gov.au