

## Bar room brawl

Alcohol is a drug. It's obvious, but it needs to be said. It's a controversial statement. The drinks industry, of course, silently resists the definition because it fears for its privileged legal status. But it's also a dangerous notion for the government, the state. If alcohol is a drug and it's okay, what does that say about nasty illicit drugs?

Include alcohol, nicotine and caffeine and nearly all of us take drugs, which throws into question the whole matter of why some of these drugs should be legal, and some shouldn't.

This was one of the issues thrown up by the recent study undertaken by Professor David Nutt comparing the harms of various legal and illegal substances.

I thought Nutt's research, which sparked media headlines such as 'Alcohol more dangerous than heroin' seemed a bit clumsy. Alcohol only came out as more harmful than heroin because it is so widely used, and it's so widely used because it's legal and accepted. And, as Nutt admits, he hasn't even begun to assess the benefits of drugs. He's done a cost-cost analysis. Hardly the basis of a rational approach.

Ironically, Nutt's demonisation of drink starts from a liberal critique of drug prohibition. It's almost as if he's kind of envious of alcohol's privileges and has an urge to drag it down off its pedestal.

Although Nutt is an extreme case, attacking booze is quite common among those who share an otherwise enlightened view of drugs. In particular they see the drinks industry as an unscrupulous dealer, interested only in maximising sales, and believe it can play no part in the formation of alcohol policy.



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True, the present government's plan to give drinks companies a bigger say – to the extent, in some accounts, of writing the policy – sounds a bad idea. But all is not quite what it seems.

Fabian historians Sidney and Beatrice Webb put their fingers on it in a little book they wrote on licensing way back in 1903. The state, they saw, is caught in a double-bind when it comes to alcohol. It wants to encourage industry and make money from taxing it, but untrammelled consumption is not an option. A drunk workforce is a disorderly and unproductive workforce. The state's role is to negotiate this contradiction and the result, the Webbs argued, is licensing.

Not only does this analysis continue to apply, it has become starkly evident in the opening months of the coalition regime. While one arm of the state is

cuddling the drinks industry, the other is punching it in the face, in the shape of the licensing reforms proposed in the Police Reform and Social Responsibility Bill.

Local authorities, the police, health bodies and pretty much anybody with a bee in their bonnet will have greater powers to block and restrict licences, potentially undermining the modest gains of the 2003 Licensing Act.

Despite what the government says, more flexible licensing laws are encouraging pub and bar operators to create relaxed environments that are not just about selling booze. Those high concentrations of city centre vertical drinking establishments that caused problems a decade ago are now better managed and diluted by venues that are also about food and entertainment.

Of course, 70 per cent of alcohol sales are made through an off-trade that has little ability, and less desire, to influence drinking culture. But pubs are able to set the tone for society, and they have the motivation. As any decent publican knows, uncontrolled boozing is not good for business.

The harms and benefits of any drug can never be reduced to the impact of a chemical on an organism. The context in which they are consumed is crucial. And perhaps pubs have something to tell us there.

It also means trying to keep politics out of alcohol and drugs policy is a mistake. The problem is not that we've got politics mixed up in it. It's that they're the wrong politics.

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