



Spirits of the age

As the Turkish government recently discovered, trying to rein in a long established drinking culture can be incendiary. The general perception of Prohibition in America, was that, it too, was doomed to failure. But was it a total flop? By Harry Shapiro

In all headline respects, Turkey in the 21st century and America of the 1920s couldn't be more different. But they do have this in common; the notion among some politicians and religious leaders that the country needed reforms to pull the nation back from a perceived escalating urban dissipation which undermined core moral/religious values. And one of the more potent symbols of this is, and was, drinking alcohol.

The modern Turkish state was established by Kemal Ataturk in 1923, since when it has enjoyed the status of a modern secular democracy. As a member of the Council of Europe, NATO and other European organisations, Turkey has looked West as much as East and in 2005 opened negotiations to become a full member of the EU. However critics say of Prime Minister Erdogan and his ruling Justice and Development Party, that they are becoming both more Islamist in outlook and dictatorial in actions, attacking the country's founding principles.

An early sign of what could become a more general sea-change in Turkish politics, are the moves to curb alcohol consumption. Under the proposals, no alcohol could be sold between 10pm and 6am; all advertising would be banned as would all sales within 100 yards of a school or mosque. Alcohol is no longer served on the domestic flights of Turkish Airlines and some restaurants frequented by tourists have already removed alcohol from the menu.

In a televised address to the nation at the end of May, the Prime Minister claimed this was not an attack on anybody's lifestyle, nor was it part of an attempt to legislate morality or impose an Islamist agenda on the people. He said it was a public health issue and

attacked what he called 'tipsy youth', saying that he wanted to build a 'devout' generation in Turkey. Business leaders expressed concerns that the legislation would damage tourism and Turkey's reputation in the world and that, contrary to government protestations, this really was about turning the clock back. Prime Minister Erdogan himself probably let the cat out the bag when he invoked the Islamic ban on alcohol as a justification for the measure. He told a meeting of Party members; "when two drunkards make a law, you respect it. But when we make a law for something that faith orders, you reject it. Why?"

Back in 1923 when Ataturk came to power, America's experiment with Prohibition was well underway. The 18th Amendment to the Constitution was passed in 1919 followed by the Volstead Act in 1920 which prohibited the manufacture, sale and supply of alcohol, although drinking and buying alcohol was not outlawed. How had this come about?

From the mid-19th century onwards, a powerful coalition of social and moral reformers and political and religious fundamentalists created a climate of public condemnation against alcohol (and also drugs). The drive towards moral social reform had its roots in the Progressive wing of the Republican Party. They claimed to speak for the white rurally-based Protestant majority who identified the national interest with evangelical Protestant values which were seen to be undermined by urban growth fuelled by mass immigration. The Progressive Movement as it became known, looked on in disgust at much of what they despised about the big city life including the poverty and crime of urban slums much of it, they believed,

fuelled by alcohol. Sub-groups emerged to take up the fight against alcohol most notably the Anti-Saloon League (ASL) and the Women Christian Temperance Union, where Protestant and Catholic campaigners joined forces. The middle class ASL came to the forefront, coordinating the campaign primarily against working class saloons, garnering much popular, press and political support. Even before national Prohibition kicked in, thirty States had already voted to go 'dry'. But then the alcohol industry began to fight back, prompting the ASL to campaign for a national ban.

It is a commonplace to declare that Prohibition was a complete failure, not least because it became the only Constitutional amendment to be repealed. But from the late 1960s, some historians began to question this and from a public health point of view, (initially anyway) they may have had a point, although other aspects of the argument are unconvincing.

There seems little doubt that Prohibition wiped out an industry. In 1916, there were 1300 breweries in the USA; by 1926 they had all gone. The number of distilleries was cut by 85%; those that remained, left to produce only industrial alcohol. Ninety per cent of all liquor wholesalers vanished and federal alcohol tax revenues evaporated from over \$400m a year to less than \$15m.

Public support for Prohibition remained high in the early years – Herbert Hoover became President in 1928 on a 'dry' ticket – and during those years, all the indices for deaths, hospital admissions and arrests for drunkenness fell sharply. As the 1920s progressed, these figures did begin to rise, but not to the levels recorded between 1900-1915. The press of the day claimed that



Prohibition actually encouraged more drinking especially among women. The rough macho culture of the saloon had given way to the semi-public and more egalitarian speakeasy at a time ('The Jazz Age') when women were breaking free from the straightjacket of 19th century conventions. So while more women were drinking publicly, it does seem that overall figures for drinking fell. Before Prohibition, working class drinking went largely unreported; now journalists were seeing more drinking among the middle classes (ie their friends and peers) and assumed that overall consumption figures were going up.

So what forced the repeal of the Volstead Act? There were two main factors. The first was economics; part of the Prohibitionist argument was that all the money saved by not drinking, would help drive prosperity – a claim which looked pretty unsustainable when the economy went over a cliff in 1929. Also as the Depression worsened, the government desperately needed those lost tax revenues and jobs restored to revitalise an industry in ruins.

The second problem was enforcement and crime. Making national Prohibition work had been a hard slog; some states, especially in the north east remained obstinately 'wet'. Nor were there enough federal agents in the field. A fatal flaw in the Volstead Act was to allow both federal and state police to enforce the law. The ASL thought the states would do the lion share so did not insist on a large federal budget for law enforcement. As it turned out, wherever enforcing the law at a state level was politically divisive, elected officials tended to look the other way. This left federal enforcement stretched impossibly thin.

Alongside lack of enforcement muscle, was a well-publicised rise in gang violence and corruption. Some revisionist historians have played this down, suggesting much of it was media

hype and that the fact that organised crime flourished post-repeal is proof that gang violence was not a cause of repeal. Naturally, the press were going to have a field day with stories about shoots-outs and the seemingly glamorous lives of figures such as Al Capone and Arnold Rothstein. But there can be little doubt that Prohibition was an important factor in how organised crime developed in succeeding years. It bankrolled growth and taught the mobsters that people would be willing to pay a high price for their pleasures. After repeal in 1933, the business model of Prohibition was employed in the service of drug trafficking. The first head of the new Bureau of Narcotics, Harry Anslinger, was trying to salvage a failed career as an anti-alcohol Treasury agent, the federal department charged with enforcing Prohibition.

Are there lessons to be learned from the experience of Prohibition? At one level, the answer is no; Prohibition was enacted as a result of a very specific set of social, moral and political circumstances and was repealed under a totally different, but equally particular set of circumstances, not least the Great Depression. More generally, you can argue that to deny a nation, an indulgence that was both legal and embedded in the cultural DNA was never going to succeed.

Yet consider the recent history of tobacco in the UK. Concerns about health effects and the growth of what might be called 'the healthy living aesthetic' from the early 1970s, saw a decline in cigarette smoking among primarily middle class smokers. This was supported by steep rises in taxation and legislatively by a gradual ban on advertising and then significant restrictions on public smoking and displays at points of sale, while the fight to introduce plain packaging continues.

For all the power of the tobacco

companies, they have been in retreat while fighting massive health damages claims in the courts. And all this against a backdrop of popular support or at least acquiescence; no rioting in the streets and no widespread pro-smoking civil disobedience. The law has not been brought into disrepute, indeed many say that the smoking ban has prompted them to cut down or give up entirely. So a national habit going back hundreds of years has been turned back with barely a whimper and with potentially significant public health gains.

When it comes to drug law reform, whatever the merits of change, the oft-cited failure of Prohibition as a core plank of the argument, is pretty weak. The ultimate aim of the Prohibitionists was to impose total abstinence from a hitherto legal product, enjoyed by a significant majority of the population. What current drug prohibition attempts to do is curtail the illegal drug use of probably no more than 10% of the population. If you really did look at the American experience, you might conclude that drug use would probably have to escalate dramatically with all manner of vested commercial and political interests straining at the leash and a concomitant collapse in respect for the law before complete repeal would be considered. One thing for sure though, once it is out there, trying to put the alcohol back in the bottle is a very tough call.