

The Editor
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Dear Editor

GROG POLICY GOING BACKWARDS

As a criminal lawyer, I am confronted daily by the devastating effects of grog. I see broken lives, broken families and broken communities. Of course, if we got rid of alcohol our social problems wouldn't all melt away, but I realised long ago that if we don't fix our grog problems, everything else we try will fail. People can't go to school or work if they're kept up all night by drunks. There's no point building new homes if drunks trash them. Health care is ineffective for patients who drink instead of taking their medicine. Gaoling offenders is a terrible waste if they get out and get straight on the grog again, only to re-offend. So I measure the year that's just gone by the progress we've made with alcohol policy.

And sad to say, we've gone backwards. At the start of the year, we had very good reason to be optimistic: the SMART Court was working well with its intensive program of supervision, support and therapy. With the Banned Drinkers Register, orders forcing problem drinkers to stay away from alcohol made by courts, police and the Alcohol and Other Drugs Tribunal, were enforceable. Thanks to the responsible attitude shown by our major retailers, Coles and Woolworths, together with the Aboriginal-owned IGA outlets, a voluntary floor price was in place, getting the cheapest, nastiest stuff off our supermarket shelves. Only the town's two drive-in bottleshops, the Gapview and the Todd Tavern, insisted on still selling cheap cask wine, but I was hopeful that over time they'd come round and do the right thing. Nationally, there was a real momentum for major reform of the way alcohol is marketed, taxed, supplied and consumed.

Well, I was wrong. It's the end of the year, and the Gapview and the Todd Tavern are still selling casks. The BDR is gone. The SMART Court's funding has been cut. The Alcohol and Other Drugs Tribunal has been abolished. A High Court challenge to the legality of Alcohol Management Plans on bush communities hangs in the balance: if it is successful, many communities which have been dry for years could see the grog flowing back. The growing support around Australia for a floor price and volumetric taxation of alcohol received a setback with the publication of an unhelpful Federal government report. But that's OK. I'm in this for the long haul. So here's cheers to 2013!

Russell Goldflam

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