

Alcohol review attempts to strike balance

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EDITORIAL

The long-awaited review of the Liquor Control Act was always destined to be criticised, given the attempt to strike a balance between the health and social impacts of alcohol misuse and the interests of the liquor and hospitality industries and their patrons.

It has been a difficult job, with strident and sometimes opposing views from the police, hotels, tourism and health lobbies.

While no report such as this can please all stakeholders, the review committee appears to have walked a reasonable line between protecting the community — particularly young people — and allowing the industry to trade without too many unnecessary restrictions.

Australian Hotels Association WA chief executive Bradley Woods described the report as a mixed “grab bag” of health and police interests that gave little regard to what the consumer and tourism and hospitality industries needed.

Indeed, many hotel and bar owners and patrons — most of whom are adult, responsible drinkers — would have wanted more liberalised opening hours.

However, considering its recommendations were made amid community concern about binge drinking and alcohol-fuelled violence across Australia, the committee could have called for a much more restrictive regime of operating hours for pubs, clubs and bars.

The major restrictions recommended were targeted at reducing alcohol harm to young people, including “secondary supply laws”, which would make it an offence to supply alcohol on unlicensed premises to a minor without parental consent.

There may be some complications in policing this kind of law but the deterrent factor would probably be advantageous for parents trying to prevent their teenagers from consuming liquor before the age of 18.

Binge drinking and out-of-control parties among young people are a major concern and while legislation cannot be the solution to a social issue, the committee was right to attempt to address it where possible.

However, some of Mr Woods’ criticisms have merit, including that there appears to have been an opportunity missed to remove some red tape from the industry.

Also, it seems nonsensical in modern times to continue to single out Sundays for early closing, particularly for tourists and the large numbers of shiftworkers in our community.

And the liquor industry is understandably opposed to the recommendation that premises bigger than 200sqm should pay an extra levy, to be used for alcohol education.

Just because a venue has more floor space — which could, for example, be used for extra dining areas instead of bars — it does not automatically mean it has more patrons, a higher turnover or is the cause of more alcohol-related social problems.

The State Government should think hard before implementing this recommendation.

However, much of the report deserves timely consideration and implementation.

It is impossible to please all sectors and cater to every need but the review appears to have struck a reasonable balance.