

### ALCOPOPS TAX AND PUBLIC HEALTH ADVOCACY

In the aftermath of the political defeat of the controversial alcopops tax, a media release\* landed on my desk. It started:

*“The ‘Rivers of grog’ that have been identified as harming people in the Northern Territory have been allowed to resume their former flow to young people due to the failure of the Coalition and Senator Fielding to support the alco-pops tax”.*

It went on: *“All of Australia’s peak public health and medical groups have acknowledged that the tax has effectively reduced the consumption of pure alcohol amongst young people and reduced harms ... It is a tragedy that this success has been ignored by vested interest groups, some politicians and others.”*

Undoubtedly an impassioned cri de coeur, but might it not also reflect a deeper frustration with the somewhat ad-hoc advocacy pursued in Australian public health? The alcopops campaign appeared to have been conducted without an overarching plan or a comprehensive coalition of public health bodies. In short, there was no focal or long-lasting ownership or strategic planning.

In response to these criticisms, a senior public health figure retorted that public health changes usually follow multiple, fragmented and muddled efforts and do not need grand strategies. That may well be so, but public health reformers will be increasingly confronted by the might of mega-industries and political alliances in their future quests — and they were clearly out-manoeuvred in the alcopops affair.

To do battle with these forces will need more than muddled and fragmented efforts — for example, in any future debate on “fat taxes” to counter the current epidemic of obesity. Such taxes have been widely debated overseas but have yet to gain prominence locally. The alcopops affair has exposed fundamental weaknesses in Australian public health advocacy that might be addressed for the sake of success in future reforms.



*Martin B Van Der Weyden*

\* People’s Alcohol Action Coalition. Alcohol legislation not passed puts all Australian families last [media release]. 20 March 2009.