

1st Dec 09

Turning Point Oration

Chief Commissioner of Victoria Police, Simon Overland's speech

Ladies and Gentlemen

It is my absolute pleasure to be here this evening and to have the opportunity to address such an important audience on an issue that is increasingly at the forefront of my mind.

The propensity of alcohol to fuel violence on our city streets is without doubt now firmly established as one of the most pressing social challenges of our time. And so I welcome the public debate that has gathered momentum in recent months and the opportunity this evening presents to make my contribution.

Alcohol and an associated drinking culture permeates almost every facet of modern life. It is the life blood of a burgeoning entertainment industry that continues to grow year on year.

Make no mistake it makes a vital contribution to our way of life. In Victoria alone, restaurants, bars, taverns and clubs represent around 2 per cent of all businesses, employing more than 80,000 people and contributing \$3.4bn per annum. And crucially of course, it is fundamental to how people perceive Melbourne as a place to live, work, visit or raise a family.

We are blessed here in Victoria to live in a region renowned throughout the world for its fine food and great wines, and this to a degree has helped shape our culture as warm, friendly and sociable people who enjoy a drink, be it in the pub, at the footie or over a meal in any one of our excellent restaurants.

But in acknowledging the great benefits that are derived from the entertainment and alcohol industries, we must also be cognisant of the risks inherent if left unchecked. Alcohol is after all an addictive substance that can fundamentally impair a person's basic coordination and judgement.

Sadly, it is all too clear that in recent years we as a society have perhaps taken our eye off the ball. The drinking culture has been allowed to transform, driven onwards by profit hungry businesses keen to exploit a new and prevailing determination amongst new generations of young people to drink until excessively drunk. And what has followed has been an alarming upsurge in late night violence.

This might sound alarmist, but for my police members who are tasked with keeping law and order on our city streets it is a reality they face every Friday and Saturday night. And until we collectively stop, start talking honestly and recognise the fragility of the current situation it will be impossible to make genuine efforts to reform a drinking culture that has become all too destructive in its nature.

Let me illustrate my point: Alcohol related crime is estimated to cost Australia \$1.7bn a year, with \$750m alone spent on policing. It is also a major cause of death and hospitalisation, with 3000 lives lost per year and 65,000 hospitalisations. Some 40 per cent of people detained by police attribute their offence to alcohol consumption.

In Victoria alone, in the past 12 months police have arrested 21,552 people for being drunk - that's 4090, or 23.4 per cent higher than in the previous year, and almost double the rate only five years ago when just over 12,000 people were arrested. And whilst we have increased in recent years the number of police on our streets, these numbers remain clearly too high.

Alcohol is also a key factor behind a huge number of road accidents, and as we approach the festive season I would ask everyone to remember that only last year 50 drivers and motorcyclists killed on our roads had a BAC of 0.05 or over.

These are big figures. They are getting worse, and they only tell half the story. Perhaps even more worrying, the nature of the violence is also getting worse.

It used to be the case that when a man was knocked down that was the end of the fight. The assailant would walk away. Not so any more. These days, a man is as likely to invite

his friends to join in - using boots, glasses or anything else at their disposal - as he is to say 'enough is enough' and walk away.

It is as if people do not truly understand the very real impact acts of violence can have on a person's life. These are not scenes out of a movie. They are real, and the reality is that one punch can kill.

So how do we tackle this problem that has been allowed to spread and undermine our traditional community values?

This is not an easy question to answer because the solutions lie in deep rooted change at many levels, from the Government down to each and every one of us. We all have a part to play and a stake in the future of our country.

What is clear however is that achieving a genuine and sustainable change in cultural attitudes and behaviour will require strategic patience. Quick wins? Yes, of course there are things we can do here and now to set the change in motion. But the critics who demand an end tomorrow must also recognise that arriving at our desired end state could take decades.

It is a huge challenge, but one we can and must rise to. And I believe Victoria is well positioned to play a key role leading the nation as it strives to set a new course for the future.

As a starting point, I would suggest there are three key areas we must focus on: **police enforcement, Government leadership** and **community support** for change. I'd like to deal with these one at a time.

So first, **Police enforcement** of the current liquor and public safety laws. This is an area in which Victoria Police has made a huge investment in recent years.

For example, in October 2007 the Safe Streets Taskforce was introduced, putting more specialist police on the streets on Friday and Saturday nights. Banning notices were introduced to keep trouble makers out of designated areas.

And Victoria Police's state-wide liquor licensing taskforce, Taskforce Razon, visited some 1600 licensed premises in a 12 month period, issuing 320 penalty notices.

These measures have made considerable impact, and it must be noted that in the CBD where the Safe Streets Task Force operates, assault figures have actually plateaued this year for the first time in a long time.

But the problems are still clear, and that is why more needs to be done. And so last month I met with my fellow commissioners from across Australia and New Zealand in Perth. We gathered because for some time we had been talking about the massive challenges posed by alcohol related violence, and we were united in our belief that something must be done.

And so we came together to announce that next month - on the weekend of 11th and 12th of December - we would flood thousands of extra police members across the countries into our city streets and regional towns for a two day blitz on alcohol related problems.

We hope this operation – called Operation Unite – will send a powerful statement to both Governments and the community at large. Our message is clear - we have had enough. Enough of picking up the pieces following endless nights of carnage caused by drunken idiots whose idea of a good night is to drink until they drop or pick up a bottle and start a fight.

So through Operation Unite and the Safe Streets Task Force, Victoria Police has been playing its part in the search for cultural change.

And when the new Operational Response Unit comes on line early next year, we will be in an even stronger position to rapidly target problem spots across the state.

But enforcement alone can only ever be part of the solution. This is a deep rooted cultural problem that can not be arrested, put on trial or locked away in a prison. I

suppose in that sense, police enforcement is the last line of defence when all else has failed.

Only by challenging the community - steered by strong leadership - to change its culture can we hope to achieve lasting change. Much good work has already been taken forward in this area. The Victorian Alcohol Action Plan was a most welcome initiative that - amongst other things - sought to put the spotlight on the social influences at play and break the traditional link between youth crime and alcohol through education and awareness.

But certainly there is scope for more. The plan has laid the foundations - now **Governments** must build on them strong and decisive policies and initiatives that will challenge convention and make genuine inroads into tackling the problems.

Most importantly, our nightspots have to change, starting with more restricted liquor trading hours. Melbourne CBD already has too many licensed premises. I welcome the freeze on new licenses announced earlier this year by the Government but believe we can and must go further.

Specifically we need to look much more closely at licence regulation. All too often in the past a license has been approved with scant consideration for the impact a new pub or club will have on the amenity of the local area.

The pub trade is important and I don't for one moment discount the huge contribution that it makes to our economy and culture. But there is a balance that must be struck between weighing up these interests and the potential impact large drinking establishments can have on the local community.

It is my opinion that for some time now that balance has been out of kilter, and we need to think about how we bring it back in line. Personally I would like to see a lot more research in this area so that authorities can collectively understand better where that point of equilibrium is and make decisions based on a fuller understanding of the broader picture.

For example, when you look at the concentration of pubs and clubs in certain parts of the city it is hard to reason how this could be sensible. We have high density areas packed with

drinking venues, each vying with one another to draw in the punters and sell them as much liquor as they can.

Is it therefore really that surprising that when the bars shut, in the early hours of the morning, we see hundreds of people spilling out onto the streets, drunk and sometimes open to picking a fight?

I would say not. And it is therefore crucial that we also look carefully at the provision of better public transport in these areas so those under the effects of alcohol can be quickly moved on and returned to their homes. Surely this would be better than letting them wander the streets or queue impatiently for want of a taxi, train or tram?

In many clubs and bars in Melbourne we have seen a shift from glass to plastic, and that has to be welcomed. I hope we will see more of this as the increasing use of glass as a weapon has been a sinister development in recent years.

I also believe our cities must do more to promote attractive alternatives to bars and clubs for evening entertainment. Melbourne is a city with a wealth of arts and culture to boast. Surely the all night opening of Salvador Dali's recent exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria – where people queued late into the night - was a good pointer to what is possible with a little imagination?

Finally, I believe we need to look very carefully at the issue of alcohol pricing and taxation. Little regard has been paid to this issue in the past, but all the research I have seen suggests that increasing tax on alcohol is the single most effective intervention we could make. And not only that, but there is an economic dividend that could be levied as well. Let me illustrate. In 2004/5, the \$5.1bn raised through alcohol-related taxes and excise was dwarfed by the \$15.3bn social costs of alcohol use. So whilst further detailed analysis may be required, there appear to be both social and economic policy arguments in favour of increased alcohol taxation.

This was a point I made a fortnight ago on 3AW, and I must say the reaction to this has provided a fascinating insight into the challenges we face. Many have been critical and resistant to the idea, arguing that this would be an additional burden on the hard pressed

families. But I must underline my central point here - responsibility for changing our cultural attitudes starts at home with every one of us and will require strong **community support**.

It's time for Australians to reform their culture of drinking, from a "drink to get drunk" culture to a "drink sensibly" culture. And that starts with people taking a greater personal sense of responsibility. Parents are of course absolutely key, and we must focus minds on teaching the younger generations about traditional community and family values – not least showing respect for one another.

Specifically, we need to challenge the cultural view that says it is okay to be drunk. It is not. Not ever. People will argue that surely within the confines of your own home this is acceptable. But the bottom line is that alcohol is a primary factor in a huge number of domestic and sexual assaults. These assaults ruin lives, including those of children, and as such must not be tolerated.

Consider for a moment drink driving. 30 years ago it was socially acceptable to drink drive, Today it is not. It is frowned upon by society. And that is what needs to happen with the broader issue of irresponsible drinking.

Perhaps my point is best illustrated by a conversation I had recently with a friend of mine who just returned from a trip to Italy. There he overheard a man telling his friend he had been drunk after two bottles of beer. He was no more inebriated than a typical Australian patron after a couple of drinks. The difference was in attitudes. It was this man's judgement that after his two bottles of beer he was drunk. Here in Australia he would be judged to have been only getting started.

To me this underlined the gulf in cultural attitudes towards drinking between Australia and other parts of the world and the need for action to start closing it.

Tackling the current drink to get drunk culture and affecting real and lasting change is a huge challenge for us all, but it is one we can not shirk for risk of undermining the social fabric of our society.

Melbourne is, as we all know, a fantastic city – a great place to live and work. But that greatness depends on a number of crucial factors, not least its ability to provide a safe and secure environment.

Ultimately, only a systemic, long term approach that sets out short term achievable goals coupled with strong leadership and an explicit understanding that it may take decades to affect significant cultural change can be successful in delivering a sustainable outcome.

But the prize of success is one worth fighting for. By doing this, not only can we reduce crime and antisocial behaviour, but we can improve health and well being across the board. And crucially, we can strengthen Victoria's image as an open, inclusive, cosmopolitan and safe community known for its hospitality and vibrant night life.