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TITLE: Alcohol and violence: Premier is simply too scared to take up gauntlet

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If Barry O'Farrell was serious about reducing alcohol-fuelled violence on Sydney streets there are solutions.

He could regulate opening hours, increase the price of alcohol sold late at night or even set a maximum blood alcohol level for people in public places and empower the police to undertake random breath testing on our streets and in our parks.

Restricting people's freedom to drink as much as they want, like restricting any freedom, is not something that should be done lightly.

But the freedom to stumble incoherently down the street needs to be balanced against the freedom for others to walk down the street in peace and safety.

As Sydney's population booms and the inner city becomes home to residents as well as revellers the odds of late-night confrontations increase. When many residents move into an area, governments often reduce people's freedom to drive at high speed. The question for the Premier is whether around-the-clock pubs and late-night trips to the shops mix?

Of course our "freedom" to walk down the street is already curbed in several ways. While we are free to walk down the footpath we are not at all free to walk down the middle of the street. Even walking down the footpath, we are not free to intimidate or threaten others. We are not free to be nude, drop cigarettes or to yell abuse.

Conservative governments always face a fundamental tension between supporting "freedom" and being "tough on law and order".

It's not obvious that we should want to curb people's right to get drunk and walk down the street. Where will it stop? Will we ban smoking on the streets next? Or talking loudly on the phone?

But what is obvious is that premiers who say they will do what it takes to make our streets safe won't. Their reluctance to regulate the behaviours they say they abhor is in part based on the contradiction behind their simultaneous support for personal freedom and strong laws, but it is also a reflex response designed to protect them from the industry that makes so much money making so many people so drunk.

An easier political path for O'Farrell is to run a series of advertisements, give the police funding for more overtime and, above all, increase the number of press conferences where senior police warn young people that there will be "zero tolerance".

Of course the difference between the regulatory approach and an information campaign is that, based on the Newcastle experience, the former will work. Indeed, the former strategy would save money while the second would cost money. So why will O'Farrell go with the ads and the press conferences?

The Coalition is a broad church, and to appear united it shies away from hard issues that split its libertarian wing from its social conservatives. That's why it always runs a mile from debates about drug law reform and euthanasia. Keeping alcohol regulation locked in the too-hard basket is the safest thing for the Premier to do.

A "better" approach for the Coalition is to appear to do something about alcohol-fuelled violence in order to hose down the "law and order" faction while ensuring they do not enrage their pro-business libertarians. That's why the press conferences with the police are such an attractive option.

Democracy is a tricky balancing act.

If O'Farrell is determined to change the culture of late-night public drunkenness and violence he will need to curb people's freedoms and introduce new regulations - regulations which will hurt some big donors to his party.

Alternatively, he could abandon the posturing and admit his philosophical problem with regulation means that late-night violence will continue to rise along with Sydney's population and the number of late-night venues selling caffeinated alcohol cocktails.

The Premier's job is to decide whether or not to put freedom to drink ahead of the freedom to avoid drunks, and the public's job is to reward or punish his decision. Of course his political advisers are likely to be telling him to hide his indecision behind some press conferences and to shift the blame onto "young people these days".

Leadership is about making hard decisions and politics is about avoiding them. This time next year we will know which one drives the Premier.

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