

DOES THE MAXWELL REPORT OFFER ANY CHANCE OF LIQUOR REFORM?

THE CHURCHES' FORUM OF THE AIR, STATION 2CH, 21st MARCH 1954

BROADCAST BY MRS. IDA A. JUDD

STATE PRESIDENT, WOMAN'S CHRISTIAN TEMPERANCE UNION OF N.S.W

The Liquor Traffic is a dangerous business and its impact upon society has caused the most damaging social problems of our time. The very fact that a Royal Commission is held bears witness to the grave influence of the liquor habit and of the vast vested interest which makes its millions out of human ignorance and weakness.

DOES THE MAXWELL REPORT OFFER ANY CHANCE OF LIQUOR REFORM? Different people attach very different meanings to the word "reform" when applied to the Liquor habit and the Liquor Traffic. To the willing or the unwilling slave of this habit-forming drug (for that is what alcohol is and it is time we became frank enough to face the fact) liquor reform means unlimited hours of sale with unlimited facilities in every way, cheaper prices, bigger glasses and perhaps even free counter-lunch. This kind of person is not nearly as interested in open-air beer gardens with lounge chairs and tables with beach umbrellas and jazz orchestras and all the rest of this high-sounding propaganda - he is interested in liquor and "reform" to him means more liquor more easily available.

On the other hand there are those, a very large number of people, who take what I consider to be a realistic attitude. These folk say "Let us face the facts frankly." Here is an immensely powerful industry - renowned for its lawlessness and rich enough and unscrupulous enough to pay for the laws it wants and to flout any law should it prove inconvenient. This traffic gathers in its millions from the sale of alcoholic beverages whose harmful effects medical science is unanimous in denouncing.

Young people in particular have a right to be taught the scientific facts about alcohol and its effect on the human system, and unfortunately both the Church and the school are largely failing to do this at the present time.

This second group of people maintains that individually and socially we would be happier and healthier if the addiction to alcohol were eliminated altogether and so they set before the community the commonsense standard of total avoidance of a harmful, habit-forming drug which has never done anyone any good, but always does harm in greater or lesser degree according to the circumstances.

We recognise that many folk are unwilling to think clearly on this as on so many subjects and they accept "social drinking" just because it has become increasingly entrenched in the customary behaviour of very many people.

No one has yet defined moderate drinking, and the limited demand of the so-called moderate drinker helps to perpetuate the entire business. The brewer is quite content with you provided you are not a convinced total abstainer. You may be a very poor customer, but provided you do not take a definite stand against his wares he is reasonably content with you. You will not do him much harm.

And so "Reform" means something which will limit and restrict the ravages of the liquor traffic.

Then there is a third group of well-meaning but not very realistic people who are genuinely concerned for the welfare of their fellows and the good of society. These people are sometimes well-informed as to the extent of this social problem, but are also frequently uninformed as to the root facts of the problem, and therefore tend to underestimate the difficulties involved in dealing with the liquor habit.

These people deplore the increasing drunkenness in Australia. They point to the fact that 60 years ago the per capita consumption of beer in Australia was 10.2 gallons. The latest figures show that this has risen to 21.5 gallons for every man, woman and child in the Commonwealth. If we limit it to those between the ages of 18 and 70 years the figure would be 15 gallons per head. Last year Australia spent £162,500,000 on liquor - that is 76% of her expenditure on defence. A few years ago a Sydney newspaper stated that Australia spent 8% of the National Income on liquor. The French people who consume nearly three times as much alcohol per head as their nearest rival in this race of death spends 10% of her income on liquor. This startling comparison will not be lost on any responsible person who really cares for Australia's future.

Well, I say, this third group, which looks for reform is appalled at facts like these and, rather innocently, they expected Mr. Justice Maxwell to produce a report which would point the way out of the morass. They admit they are disappointed.

The REPORT does not tell us anything we did not already know quite well. It brought to light many examples of the lawlessness and corruption which are inseparable from this most lawless traffic. Ready enough as some of the people in this third group are to be side-tracked and to accept some superficial remedy as though it were a real cure, they can see no useful constructive suggestion in this Report.

In the face of the advancing tide of liquor addiction in this State the best the Commissioner could do was to suggest that we open the flood gates still more widely. I am not imputing any motives to him, no doubt he is quite sincere, but I believe he is sincerely mistaken.

Apart from those who want unrestricted facilities (the first group I called them) the only people likely to agree with the Report are those who say: "Well, we cannot get people to take a sane attitude and face the facts about this social and personal problem, so

the only thing to do is to come to terms with it and surrender unconditionally." It is like saying if people do not want the truth give them lies, if that is what they want. How utterly unworthy is such an attitude. No Christian, no patriot can have anything to do with such an attitude which, apart from everything else, is the negation of leadership.

The Report says "Do not restore Local Option." Don't give the people the democratic right to say whether the liquor selling places shall continue or be reduced or abolished in their own localities. The reasons he adduces are very UNCONVINCING. Do not restore Local Option, it would give the people a chance to limit the liquor traffic and the traffic fears Local Option more than any other limiting measure.

Over 35 MILLION people in the United States have voted their areas "dry" (as they call it) because they can exercise this right which Parliament removed from the Statute book and which the Report says should not be restored. When you read that you are not very surprised that the rest of the Report is all on one side.

The Report says - "Give more Club licenses." The 1946 Liquor Amendment Act greatly increased the number of licensed clubs and to everyone's amazement the Court held that the 6 p.m. closing law did not apply to them, so that the licensed club has frequently become an unrestricted drinking place - adding more than its quota to the sum total of this major problem.

But the Report says - "Let us solve the problem by making it worse. Let us have more licensed clubs. How can we be expected to understand, let alone respect, this kind of reasoning? Is it sound reasoning by any stretch of the imagination?"

And then, at last we come to the major contribution of the Report. The great subject of closing hours. Even though the terms of reference made no reference to the hours of closing it was soon clear that the Judge was going to say a great deal about them and that, in his view, all sorts of terrible things were due to the fact that hotels have to close at 6 p.m. You see the Report is consistent. Its tenor is all in one direction - open the flood gates as widely as you can let there be no restrictions at all.

The majority of people know what will happen if you have later hours. 62.5% of the electors showed this when they voted so overwhelmingly for 6 p.m. closing in 1947. We knew that the liquor traffic and its fellow travellers would never accept this verdict, and they certainly have not, and here is the Report saying, in effect, let us forget about the people's vote at the Referendums in 1916 and 1947, let us make it 10 p.m. and be done with it. The theory seems to be that men leaving work would go straight home and only think of going to the hotels to drink after they have dined at home. No doubt they will alter their habits all in the interest of this theory that 10 p.m. closing will mean less consumption. Of course this is NONSENSE.

We are asked to believe that the brewers spent tens of thousands of pounds before the 1947 Referendum to try to get people to vote for 10 p.m. closing so that they could sell LESS of their products. There will always be a closing hour rush whatever that hour may be. Before 1916 there was an 11 o'clock rush. There is a 10 o'clock rush in Brisbane, and Western Australia with 9 p.m. closing has the highest per capita consumption of any State in Australia.

It is not the closing hour nor the rush that causes the problem. It is the alcoholic beverage that is being consumed. WHY CAN'T WE FACE THE FACT?

What effect would later closing have on the ghastly toll of the road? Our generation has become largely insensible to horror. Two World Wars and an age which thinks in terms of atom and hydrogen bombs has almost passed the stage of being moved at what is happening on our highways.

According to the Chief of the Australian General Staff, Australia's losses in the whole of the Korean war were 258 killed, 30 missing, 1,013 wounded. General Rowell said these were heavy losses, heavier than those suffered by the 6th Division in 1941 in Libya.

During the same period of the war in Korea 2,103 people were killed on the roads of this State and more than 5,000 were killed during that time in the whole Commonwealth. These are appalling figures. What part does the drinking driver play in this terrible total? So strong is the grip of social drinking that even Road Safety Councils and similar bodies are very diffident about speaking out strongly on this question. Surely the time has come for the introduction of Compulsory Chemical Tests to determine whether a driver is under the influence or not.

Certainly the appearance of the Report has aroused vigorous discussion of the liquor problem and that is all to the good. Much is being said about lowering the alcoholic content of beer. Of course the lower the percentage the better, but it is foolish to talk as though a lower percentage could solve the whole problem.

Probably the brewers will welcome a lower content as the determined drinker will probably drink more. There is a difference of opinion as to what is the lowest percentage of alcohol required to keep beer under Australian conditions. Although we hear so much about the low content of English beers the per capita consumption of pure alcohol in Great Britain is 6.01 litres while the Australian figure is slightly less - 5.8 litres.

Term 9 of the Terms of Reference of the Royal Commission states: "The Extent to which all or any of the matters arising under the foregoing questions operate to the detriment of the public interest."

Mr. Justice Maxwell did not deal with Term 9. He had to attempt all questions but he failed to answer No. 9. This failure is the flaw which spoils the whole Report.

Like so many people today the Commissioner won't face up to the real issue which is that unless public opinion is educated and guided to realize the extent and danger of the present situation and unless we wake up to the need for treating beverage alcohol and the liquor traffic as public enemies the position will get steadily worse. The economic waste is already beyond computation, to say nothing of the losses in terms of human personality.

We have let the position drift so far and let social drinking get so deeply entrenched that those who should lead seem afraid to speak out about the facts, and, as I said, the Church is failing to some extent in this regard.

The Report is a failure. It is not worth serious attention. Instead of helping to check the problem it says "Let's open the flood gates altogether".

There was once an Irishman whose wife used to beat him occasionally. When his friends asked him why he allowed this he said "It does'nt hurt me and it seems to please her". And that is how the Liquor Traffic quite realistically regards such reforms as those contained in the Maxwell Report.

No, I'm afraid the Maxwell Report does not give any prospect of realistic reform. I have pointed out that different groups attach very different meanings to the work "reform" but the only people likely to be happy about the Report are those who think we should follow France on the road downhill.

(IDA A. JUDD)