



Speech by

Miss FIONA SIMPSON

MEMBER FOR MAROOCHYDORE

Hansard 7 October 2003

LIQUOR AMENDMENT BILL

Resumed from 27 May 2003 (see p. 2075).

Miss SIMPSON (Maroochydore—NPA) (2.41 p.m.): I rise to support the Liquor Amendment Act in its thrust to raise the standard of service in the industry by making it mandatory for new licensees to undertake training. Done properly, this is only a positive initiative. I welcome this move and look forward to the roll-out and extension of these programs in consultation with industry and would hope that additional resources are also provided for existing licensees to receive improved training. Selling alcohol is not like selling a loaf of bread. Liquor retail as an industry continues to be regulated due to the complex social issues that arise from the abuse of alcohol by individuals and the impact on the wider community. We recognise that it is not only an issue of individual choice to drink but also one of good public policy that requires controlled access through licensed premises with the responsible serving of alcohol.

Most people do not abuse their consumption and it is an enjoyable and sensibly used product in their lives. But, unfortunately, that is not the case for others. The rise in public drunkenness is a social phenomenon increasingly with younger and younger binge drinkers, but it is not restricted only to the young. Certainly anecdotally we are seeing older age brackets also involved in public drunkenness. This is not an issue simply with those who are homeless or in fact only with those who have a mental illness. Rather, there are complex social issues even though those are factors in some circumstances. This is an issue that, beyond the scope of this legislation we are debating today, requires far more research and insight with appropriate local action plans.

How the serving of alcohol is regulated and the interaction with other agencies such as police and local government is a matter of public interest and one that has undergone significant changes in the last few years. Further amendments are likely to come forward with regard to the Liquor Act in the not-too-distant future, and I look forward with interest to their exact content. I support a vibrant tourism industry that has access to appropriate liquor licences, but I note that there are still significant problems with consumption of alcohol in public places and under the current law with regard to policing of some of the newer outlets, particularly some of the smaller bars-cum-cafes. When it is done properly, it really adds to the ambience and experience of our tourism industry and those who live in these areas—and certainly we have appreciated some of the changes in hospitality and delivery of services—but a real issue has arisen in terms of a lack of liquor licensing officers.

There simply are not enough liquor licensing officers in Queensland. According to government figures previously provided to the National-Liberal opposition during the budget estimates, there are a total of 25 such officers for Queensland. I would ask the minister to advise the House of the number of officers in each of the regions and the size of the regions that they have to cover in distance terms as well as geography. The Sunshine Coast region has only been served by about two licensing officers at times who also have to travel far further to the north, with potentially hundreds of licensed premises in their catchment. This is certainly relevant in terms of the roll-out of training and also with regard to the ongoing implementation of existing laws, let alone new laws.

When there are so many existing licensees in the marketplace who have been in the business for some time, there is a very real issue as to how the laws are appropriately policed. I have a concern

about the sheer lack of liquor licensing officers to match the significant increase in licensed outlets. I would also welcome the minister's advice as to the estimated number of trainers under this legislation who are to come online this year and the total cost of this initiative and whether it is to be met from within the department's budget and what the estimated fee is per course.

With regard to the other issue in the discussion paper that has only recently been consulted upon from Liquor Licensing, I welcome the fact that the issue of water in nightclubs has been raised. That was an issue that the National-Liberal opposition first put on the public agenda because we believed it was a significant public health issue and an issue that many young people raised with us because of those few unscrupulous licensees who were only providing hot water in the toilets and who made the purchase of water extremely expensive or discouraged it. We believe that it is important that there be access to drinking water in nightclubs as part of the responsible serving of alcohol.

The issue of public drunkenness is something that requires far more intensive local solutions and appropriate legislative change. I did note with some interest the fact that during a matters of public interest debate the member for Cairns raised the issue of case management. While this is not something that strictly falls within the terms of the Liquor Act, it is really about having a lateral approach to the issues of addictive behaviour and, in this case, the abuse of alcohol consumption and making sure that we do have real and proper collaborative working relationships with other agencies, particularly the police but also local government.

Within my own electorate is beautiful Mooloolaba and the many fantastic outdoor dining cafes. There has been an increase in licensed premises and unfortunately there is an issue beneath the surface—sometimes not that far beneath—with public drunkenness. The Mooloolaba Safe Committee, which was initially funded with assistance from the Health Department, has achieved many good things. However, these days local government has a lot of onus put on it in how it seeks to interact and to deal with these issues. In fact, there are rangers who assist police in this area. They have also been very active in trying to address these issues, but time and again we find that there simply has not been a good strategic approach across government to ensure that we start to look at these issues very openly and very honestly. Earlier I mentioned the comments of the member for Cairns in terms of case management, because that looks at people who have not just a one-off issue but perhaps have more extensive issues beneath the surface which end up not only being destructive for the individual but also having quite a severe impact upon the community through their behaviour in a public place.

We need to be open, where appropriate, to changing the legislation and making sure that the duty of care in respect of the responsible service of alcohol to individuals extends past the front door. It might not only be the licensee's responsibility but also the government's responsibility, which provides the licences and the legislative framework, to make sure that repeat or problem drinkers are able to access alcohol and drug services. Tragically, in recent years, dedicated detoxification beds in our public hospitals have been closed. Although I recognise that this is not strictly within the licensing act, it is an issue related to it.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Mickel): Order! I would ask the House to recognise in the gallery students from Stanford University, California, who are studying at the University of Queensland.

Honourable members: Hear, hear!

Miss SIMPSON: Interestingly, when talking about health issues and how they stem from other legislation, the issue of the lack of detoxification beds is often explained by the Health Minister as being good practice. However, it is actually economic rationalisation. If we as a community are to fulfil our responsibilities in terms of the responsible service of alcohol and the provision of services to those with drinking problems, we need to look at these issues as well; otherwise, these people will end up homeless and on the streets time and again. Members of the public often complain about being bothered by people in parks. Alcohol problems often have a high co-morbidity with mental health problems. The issue goes around in circles.

I encourage the Minister for Tourism, who is responsible for Liquor Licensing, in consultation with her other colleagues, to highlight the need for dedicated research into public drunkenness in order to find local solutions for those with repeat problem drinkers. There needs to be a continuity of care and an assessment of whether the existing services are adequate.

I repeat that we believe this legislation is heading in the right direction. I would like to ensure that the existing licensees also have access to training courses so that we can ensure the responsible service of alcohol. I acknowledge that the industry has been consulted widely on this legislation. On the whole, most people are responsible when it comes to the consumption of alcohol. However, patterns are changing. For example, some people drink heavily before going out to socialise and before they even hit licensed premises and public spaces. That trend has changed our response to these difficult issues. We cannot ignore the social impacts. Although this behaviour is not from the majority, these people are having a significant impact on our community.

We need to find better ways of addressing this issue, because there has been a significant increase in public drunkenness. We cannot simply say that it is not the responsibility of this act or that it

is the responsibility of another minister. It is about having a cohesive policy across ministers to ensure a better outcome. I commend this legislation and welcome its implementation. I trust the minister will be able to answer some of the questions I have asked about implementation and costs. I reiterate that we need to see an increase in the number of Liquor Licensing officers to assist in that process. They are very important in the implementation of the legislation.