

## This Week Temperance

There has been a groundswell of support in recent years for a return to temperance, an absence or cutting back of drinking alcohol. Phil Mellows asks if pubs should worry

# On the road to prohibition?

HEALTH SECRETARY Dawn Primarolo sounds like a sort of a cross between a creamy cheese from a tube and a toffee-filled chocolate. But her opening words at last November's National Alcohol Conference were enough to send a chill down the spine.

"There is an argument – a very strong argument," she said, "that problem drinking is, in a sense, becoming 'the new smoking' in terms of the challenge that it presents to public health."

This is what the trade fears. The government is going to crack down on drinking as it cracked down on smoking, drastically reducing alcohol's availability through tighter regulation and higher taxes.

In fact, we are already well into the process, the next phase of which, as the government announced earlier this month, will be mandatory controls on drinks promotions and the enforcement of smaller measures of wines and spirits.

It's "the temperance book without the hymns" Andrew McNeill says of New Labour's alcohol policy. And he should know. McNeill is director of the Institute of Alcohol Studies (IAS) which, despite its scientific trappings, is part of an international temperance movement that has its roots in 19th century evangelical teetotalism. Key backers of the IAS include the Independent Order of Good Templars (IOGT) and Hope UK, formerly the Band of Hope.

Until recently temperance was a joke, conjuring up images of hymn-singing and tambourine-rattling, fervid preaching and grim piety from its Victorian heyday. But in the last few years the direct descendants of those cartoon characters have felt confident enough to use the word proudly once again.

And they are back swimming in the mainstream of political opinion. In November 2007 Gordon Brown hosted a Downing Street summit on the perils of binge-drinking. In addition to drinks industry leaders the chairman of IAS, Professor Brian Prichard, was present. The IAS is also prominent in the Alcohol Health Alliance, which formalises the powerful coalition that has emerged between temperance and the health lobby.

How did this happen? Over 30 years or so the ideas of temperance and health have converged, gaining purchase with the government during the



Then-Culture Secretary James Parnell, Prime Minister Gordon Brown and Home Secretary Jacqui Smith at the 2007 Downing Street summit on the perils of binge-drinking

moral panic around binge-drinking. The IOGT, after decades of getting nowhere, shelved its aspirations for prohibition and instead played for reducing overall consumption, working for restrictions on alcohol through mainstream bodies.

At the same time the medical profession moved away from the 'disease theory' of alcohol problems, which focuses on individuals, towards a 'whole population' approach at the core of which is the idea that a reduction in alcohol consumption across a society has a direct and positive impact on the general health of that society.

Whether this is true or not is by no means settled. But right now the theory holds sway – and the government believes it. Making the case for a mandatory code of practice, the Home Office uses research from the University of Sheffield that makes a hard-

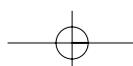
cash calculation of what an overall reduction in alcohol consumption can save the NHS and others.

A footnote in the report adds: "A one per cent reduction in alcohol consumption is not the target for this policy, nor is it an estimate of any likely effects."

But if the policy is designed to purely target problem drinkers why mention it? And forcing all pubs to offer smaller glasses is clearly intended to reduce consumption.

The 'whole population' approach means medics and government are singing off the same hymn-sheet as the surviving currents of temperance for whom we are all, potentially, sinners.

So are we on the road to prohibition? For the activists of new temperance we are only at the thin end of a fat wedge. And they are going to keep on pushing. ■



# Temperance **This Week**



The Independent Order of Good Templars took a stance for religious reasons. Now it's advocating restrictions on alcohol sales

## The Templars of Temperance

Before the middle of the 19th century the UK temperance movement was anti-spirits rather than anti-alcohol. Teetotalers were marginalised until the ideas of the more radical movement in the United States were imported in the 1850s.

The most zealous of all temperance groups, the Independent Order of Good Templars (IOGT), was formed in that decade and quickly became a global movement.

The IOGT promoted a lifestyle free from alcohol and drugs. Only total abstinence could make people free to be the way God intended, it believed.

Members signed a pledge not to drink and evangelised to others. By 1891 some eight million people had taken the pledge and 400,000 were "active in the cause".

Licensing reform in the First World War and the disastrous experiment of prohibition in America took its toll on temperance. The IOGT survived as a hard-line sect until the 1970s when its leader, Derek Rutherford, turned the organisation away from a direct drive for prohibition towards a more consumer-friendly campaign to reduce alcohol harm.

Initially this meant working with the National Council on Alcoholism (which later evolved into Alcohol Concern).

But in 1982 a row with a new chairman, who said he had no time for "a bunch of Methodist teetotalers", caused him to walk out.

Along with Andrew McNeill he set up the Institute of Alcohol Studies and established a strong relationship with the World Health Organisation (WHO). In a submission to a recent WHO public hearing the IOGT, now based in Sweden with branches all over the world, restated its 'whole population' goals.

"So far there has been an overwhelming focus on abuse and excessive drinking while the use itself has received little or no attention. There is scientific support for addressing the population at large.

"Availability can be restricted by high pricing. Taxation is a powerful instrument... Severe restrictions or a ban on alcohol marketing is a powerful and effective measure to reduce consumption and harm."

It adds: "The alcohol industry and distributors should be kept well out of the policy-making."

## 'Stop the neo-prohibitionists'

Paul Chase, chairman of licensed trade training company CPL and a former nightclub licensee on Merseyside for 30 years, has made a study of new temperance – although, as no mincer of



words, he prefers to call it neo-prohibition. He advocates more money being spent by the industry to counter the arguments of the anti-alcohol campaigners and spoke of the growing influence of temperance at *The Publican's Pub Trade Summit* last November.

"It's happening through the health lobby," he says. "There has been a rebranding of old ideas, moral arguments are dressed up as medical arguments. There are some baleful statistics on alcohol misuse but these people are jumping on the bandwagon. Is prohibition or limiting availability the answer? Neo-prohibitionists believe drink itself is the primary factor in alcohol misuse. But there are other factors – the mindset of the user, the cultural environment.

"Because neo-prohibitionists misunderstand the nature of the problem it leads to them scapegoating those who trade in alcohol. You need to look at the culture, not the distribution system."

## Open all hours?

In 2005 the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, which spent most of the 20th century campaigning on poverty, returned to its 19th century temperance roots via publication of a report assessing temperance's influence on current government policy.

Author Virginia Berridge, a professor at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, said: "The Licensing Act 2003, by locating licensing within local government, has carried through part of the temperance agenda of the 1880s."

That agenda saw outright prohibition coming piecemeal by persuading local councils one by one of the evils of alcohol. The switch made by the 2003 Act from magistrates to local authority control, with greater powers of intervention given to the general public, is now seen as a chance

for temperance "to build local networks and coalitions in relation to licensing matters".

The Open All Hours? network, supported by the IAS, was set up after 2003 to co-ordinate temperance's intervention among residents opposing licensing. How effective it has been is hard to judge.

