

MAY 2012

BOOZY BRITAIN

DOLAN CUMMINGS



MOTION:

**“MINIMUM ALCOHOL
PRICING WOULD BE
GOOD FOR BRITAIN”**

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KEY TERMS

Binge drinking

Harm principle

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Pre-loading

INTRODUCTION

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In May this year, the Scottish Parliament passed the Alcohol Minimum Pricing Bill [Ref: [Scottish Parliament](#)], which sets a minimum price for all alcoholic drinks of 50p per unit of alcohol. The UK government is planning similar legislation for England and Wales [Ref: [BBC News](#)], with a minimum price proposed of 40p. Widespread concern about the availability of cheap alcohol, with regular headlines about ‘boozy Britain’ [Ref: [Daily Mail](#)], teenage ‘binge-drinking’ [Ref: [BBC News](#)], or indeed middle-aged people drinking too much [Ref: [Independent](#)] indicates a growing worry over the extent of alcohol abuse in Britain. Advocates of minimum pricing argue that alcohol is a powerful drug, and should not be treated as just another commodity [Ref: [Economist](#)]. There is a consensus across the mainstream political spectrum that something needs to be done. Even people who are unsure it will work believe it is better to try this than do nothing [Ref: [BBC News](#)]. Nevertheless, the proposals have their critics, who variously dispute the legitimacy of state intervention in the free market - arguing minimum pricing amounts to a ‘sin tax’ [Ref: [Guardian](#)] - object to the government trying to manipulate public behaviour and characterise the concern with excessive drinking as a ‘moral panic’ based on snobbery about people who enjoy drinking, rather than a real social problem [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. They also point out that minimum-pricing would hit the poorest consumers hardest [Ref: [Guardian](#)] and that overall Britons are drinking less than in the past [Ref: [Independent](#)]. Nonetheless, supporters of minimum pricing insist there is undeniably a problem and that anyone who doubts this should visit their local A&E department on a Saturday night [Ref: [Independent](#)].



A 'public health' measure

Excessive drinking can cause serious damage to people's health, both long-term through liver disease and other chronic conditions, and short-term through alcohol poisoning and injuries associated with drunkenness, whether from accidents or violence. That violence is also regarded as a serious problem in itself: alcohol is considered a significant factor both in domestic violence and street violence, particularly late at night in towns and cities when groups of drinkers spill out into the streets from closing pubs and clubs. Advocates of minimum pricing suggest drunken disorder at closing time is fuelled by 'pre-loading', when people get drunk on cheap alcohol at home before going out for the evening [Ref: [BBC News](#)]. Drawing on an influential model developed by public health experts [Ref: [University of Sheffield](#)], Prime Minister David Cameron suggests a minimum price of 40p per unit of alcohol 'could mean 50,000 fewer crimes each year and 900 fewer alcohol related deaths per year by the end of the decade' [Ref: [BBC News](#)]. Before the government settled on a minimum pricing policy, however, even health secretary Andrew Lansley argued it would have little effect, suggesting it is 'absurd' to think a slight rise in price would deter so-called pre-loading [Ref: [Independent on Sunday](#)]. But Professor Alan Brennan of Sheffield University insists, "The evidence is absolutely completely overwhelming that if you increase prices people drink less alcohol" [Ref: [Independent on Sunday](#)]. What remains unclear is whether minimum pricing will reduce the harm caused by excessive drinking, or simply mean moderate drinkers cut down further to save money. Critics point out that problem drinkers are least likely to respond to a price rise; in economic terms, their demand is the most 'inelastic' [Ref: [Centre for Policy Studies](#)]. In terms of public health, however, any reduction in the amount people drink is seen as a good thing.

Is minimum pricing unacceptably paternalistic?

Most people agree that in principle individuals should be free to make their own decisions about how they live, provided they don't harm anyone else. This idea is closely associated with the 19th century British thinker JS Mill, and is commonly known as the 'harm principle' [Ref: [Wikipedia](#)]. From this perspective, if people choose to drink too much, that is their own business, and the state has no right to interfere. Against this, many argue that excessive drinking does cause harm to others, in a variety of ways: drunk people sometimes behave badly or even violently, while the effects of drunkenness on health increases costs for the NHS [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. Critics counter that the drinks industry raises more in taxes than drinking costs in healthcare [Ref: [Adam Smith Institute](#)] and, perhaps more importantly, that individual drinkers who misbehave and break the law should be held accountable as individuals, rather than punishing all drinkers with higher prices [Ref: [Centre for Policy Studies](#)]. Others argue that the state has a responsibility to help people make the right decisions, through education but also laws, such as the ban on smoking in public places [Ref: [Independent](#)]. They also suggest minimum pricing is simply a sensible extension of existing licensing laws [Ref: [The Sunday Times](#)]. Critics point out that many public health campaigners see minimum pricing as part of a strategy of 'denormalising' alcohol, so it is treated as an illicit drug rather than a normal part of life, meaning that further regulations are likely to follow [Ref: [spiked](#)].

Does Britain need to change its relationship with alcohol?

For some, the problem with drinking in Britain is not simply that a minority drink too much, but that the whole culture is too accepting of drunkenness. From this perspective, minimum pricing could be



THE BOOZY BRITAIN DEBATE CONTINUED...

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seen as a positive statement about the need to change attitudes, regardless of whether it can be shown directly to reduce harm [Ref: [Independent](#)]. Britain's drinking culture is often compared unfavourably with the culture in countries like France and Italy, where people drink regularly but less heavily, and tend not to get drunk in public. While drink in those countries is in fact often very cheap, supporters of minimum pricing in the UK argue cultural differences make it necessary here [Ref: [Telegraph](#)]. Critics counter that there is nothing wrong with Britain's drinking culture, and that for most people alcohol is an enjoyable part of everyday life, insisting that a sharp distinction should be drawn between the minority of problem drinkers and the majority of responsible drinkers [Ref: [Spectator](#)]. Taking a different tack, social anthropologist Kate Fox accepts there may be some problems with Britain's drinking culture, but argues that the tendency to blame alcohol for bad behaviour – and to treat it as an illicit drug - actually undermines responsibility far more than alcohol itself. Fox advocates a completely different approach that emphasises alcohol does not cause disinhibition and that, even when drunk, you are in control of and responsible for your behaviour [Ref: [BBC News](#)]. A major question at stake is whether, overall, the availability of cheap alcohol improves people's quality of life by allowing them to enjoy a product they like at low prices, or whether it diminishes quality of life by encouraging unhealthy drinking habits.



ESSENTIAL READING

Is it right to introduce a minimum alcohol price to tackle alcohol-related problems?

Dr Sarah Wollaston MP and Philip Davies MP *Centre for Policy Studies*

FOR

No shame to let state call shots over booze

Gillian Bowditch *The Sunday Times* 19 May 2012

The fun police are right on minimum pricing

Dr Carsten Grimm *Pulse Today* 12 April 2012

The Swedes have the right idea on binge drinking

Philip Hensher *Independent* 24 March 2012

Alcohol minimum pricing should be this government's first bold evidence-based drug policy

Ewan Hoyle *Democrat Voice* 30 December 2011

A 'nudge' won't neutralise the scourge of cheap booze

Sarah Wollaston *Guardian* 11 October 2011

Alcohol is costing us dearly – we need action now

Vivienne Nathanson *Guardian* 14 March 2011

AGAINST

Minimum alcohol pricing? Blame those vomiting girls

Tanya Gold *Guardian* 15 May 2012

The injustice of minimum alcohol pricing

Sam Bowman *Adam Smith Institute* 23 March 2012

Minimum alcohol pricing: illogical, illiberal, unfair

Ryan Bourne *Centre for Policy Studies* 23 March 2012

We should stop panicking about Boozy Britain

Chris Snowdon *Independent* 15 November 2011

The excess is not in alcohol but in Britain's self-loathing

Jonathan Jones *Guardian* 23 September 2011

Scotland's petty prohibition

Brendan O'Neill *Guardian* 3 March 2009

IN DEPTH

Reducing the affordability of alcohol: A briefing from the BMA Board of Science

British Medical Association April 2012

Britain's alcohol crisis: Is there a cure for the biggest hangover in Europe?

Matt Chorley and Jonathan Owen *Independent* 18 December 2011

We've had enough

Ciara Kenny *The Sunday Times* 6 November 2011

Viewpoint: Is the alcohol message all wrong?

Kate Fox *BBC News* 12 October 2011

We don't need to be saved from the 'demon drink'

Josie Appleton *spiked* 23 March 2011

Drink: The British Disease?

James Nicholls *History Today* Volume: 60 Issue: 1 2010

Don't worry- drink and be merry

Leah McLaren *Spectator* 30 December 2009

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BACKGROUNDEERS

Inebriation is not funny – it causes untold harm to us all
Mary Kenny *Independent (Ireland)* 26 March 2012

Eric Joyce: Alcohol minimum price ‘abominable’
BBC Newsnight 23 March 2012

Alcohol minimum pricing Q&A
Sky News 23 March 2012

The Government’s Alcohol Strategy
HM Government March 2012

Binge-drinking can go the way of smoking
Steve Richards *Independent* 16 February 2012

Sin taxes are a sin in themselves
Martin Cullip *The Free Society* 30 November 2011

Will a minimum price for alcohol reduce binge drinking?
NICE 21 June 2011

University review confirms link between alcohol pricing and crime
University of Sheffield 18 January 2011

The war on alcohol: new puritanism or healthy sobriety?
Battle of Ideas 2010

The worth of a pint
Richard Reeves *Guardian* 7 January 2010

The Sheffield Alcohol Policy Model (SAPM)
University of Sheffield

This house would introduce minimum pricing on alcohol sales
Idea (International Debate Education Association)

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ORGANISATIONS

Alcohol Concern

Alcohol Policy

British Medical Association (Alcohol)

Drink Aware

Free Society: Food & Drink

Manifesto Club: Booze Ban

NICE

Portman Group



IN THE NEWS

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NOTES

Scottish drink-drive limit to be lowered

BBC News 27 May 2012

Cider maker urges drinkers to sign online petition save brew

Thisissomerset.co.uk 24 May 2012

I'll take the high ground... Scotland introduces minimum pricing for alcohol

Thisislondon.co.uk 24 May 2012

Young in North most likely to have alcohol problems

Independent 16 May 2012

One in eight deaths before retirement is caused by alcohol, study finds

Daily Mail 16 May 2012

Wales deaths from drug and drink issues up 31% in 10 years,

ONS figures show

BBC News 16 May 2012

London fights binge-drinking epidemic

Fox News 14 May 2012

Alcohol interventions 'should be included in QOF'

Pulse 11 May 2012

Cameron 'warned alcohol policy could be illegal by own ministers'

Telegraph 9 May 2012



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