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**New Licensing Laws Fail To Resolve “Binge Drinking” In The UK**

**Andrew Swan, Solicitor in the Licensing Unit at leading North East law firm, Ward Hadaway, considers the new licensing laws failing to resolve binge drinking in the UK.**

The Government have finally accepted that the extended licensing hours allowing pubs and clubs to stay open later has not resolved the UK ‘epidemic’ of ‘binge drinking’.

Did anyone really think they would?

A report prepared for the Culture Ministry has shown there has been a slight fall in the overall alcohol consumption since the new licensing laws came into effect. Researchers have not found any significant shift in Britain’s drinking culture.

The report says “licensing regimes may be one factor in effecting change to the Country’s drinking culture – and its impact on crime – but they do not appear to be the critical one”.

Research by Alcohol Concern has indicated that it was unrealistic to expect to transplant one drinking culture, which has grown up according to specific tastes or climate, to another Country.

The Government however had predicted that switching to round-the-clock opening would usher in a relaxed Continental-style of drinking, free from trouble.

Tessa Jowell, the former Culture Secretary, stated in 2002 in favour of the Licensing Bill: “The changes will encourage a more civilised atmosphere in pubs, bars and restaurants and will increase choice for customers. The existing laws have not encouraged the emergence of the civilised café society”.

However, at the end of 2006, Labour MP Hazel Blears stated: “I don’t know whether we will ever get to be in a European drinking culture, where you go out and have a single glass of wine. May be it is our Anglo-Saxon mentality? We actually enjoy getting drunk”.

Has this not been the case for years?

My understanding of “binge drinking” is that it refers to people taking excessive amounts of alcohol in one session, usually some time around the weekend. The media have recently focused their attention on the younger sections of the population and certainly those in their teenage years. Although the middle-aged, middle-classes have not avoided recent press attention on the issue.

Most of us enjoy the new extended opening hours. We do not have to end our evenings early on weekends because the bars are closing at 11.00 pm (a closing time introduced during World War II for munitions workers!). It certainly has not turned us all into binge drinkers.

What the Government should be doing is focusing on wider social issues, which lead many people to drink excessively in the first place. When we start to enjoy a more relaxed European lifestyle, then maybe we will adopt a similar attitude to alcohol.

**By Andrew Swan, Solicitor in the Licensing Unit at leading North East law firm Ward Hadaway.**

*This briefing is for general guidance only. It represents our understanding of English law and practice as at April 2008, but is not intended to be a comprehensive statement of the law. Readers are advised to seek specific guidance from Ward Hadaway.*