

[Comment] Drinking tells us something about Europe

25.07.2006 - 09:22 CET | By Richard Laming

EUOBSERVER / COMMENT - The consumption of alcohol is something that both unites and divides Europe, with important political consequences as we shall see. Alcoholic drinks are part of our culture, but also part of our economy.

Think about all the different national rituals that centre on drinking. Practically the first words you learn in a new language are cheers, prosit, or skål.

In fact, Europeans drink more than people elsewhere. The average European gets through about 9 litres of pure alcohol per year, compared with less than 7 in America or less than 4 in China.

Indeed, every country has its own traditional drinks, from whisky to slivovitz, grappa to vodka. And European wines are defined by the region they come from, whereas new world wines are defined by the grapes they are made from. The wine is a product of the very land itself.

But this is where it starts to get difficult.

A new policy proposal from the European Commission would reduce European wine production, favouring quality over quantity. Wines from outside the EU, from countries such as Australia and Chile, are gaining market share in Europe, and there is a surplus of EU production that no-one wants to drink. Cutting back on this useless production would make sense, but what happens to the people who make it?

There is a balance to strike between modernising the European economy in the face of globalisation and preserving the traditions of the rural economy. Wine is not the only sector where this applies, but it is one of the clearest examples of the kind.

Next, there is the problem of taxation. The traditional view is that tax levels are a matter for the member states. Some people even claim that they are a vital matter of national sovereignty. But in the single market, is that really sustainable?

In Finland, for example, many people now travel to Estonia to buy cheaper drinks. The taxes in Estonia are much lower, so it is hardly surprising. Brewers in the south east of England have long complained about the loss of sales because of cross-Channel shoppers going on day trips to France.

But which is the bigger problem: the harmonisation of national tax rates, or the distortion of the single market? Tax rates are what they are not only for economic reasons – raising tens of billions of euros each year – but also for health reasons. High taxes reduce consumption, and that brings us to a third question.

What role should there be for European-wide action to preserve public health?

The high tax countries in the north of Europe are the ones that fear most the consequences of excessive drinking. They are not necessarily the ones that actually have the most to fear, but when it comes to public protection, perception beats reality every time.

It is in fact a perfect example of a political question. How much should individual freedoms be curtailed (by higher taxes) in the interests of the wider community (to reduce drunkenness) or even in the interests of the individual concerned (to prevent ill-health).

This is a classic problem of the conflict of rights which liberal democracy was designed to deal with. This is a good reason why the European Union needs to be developed in a democratic direction itself.

The constitutional treaty attempted to deal with the differing problems of health care in a rather subtle and sophisticated way. The provision of health services remained for the member states, but cooperation on public health was something that could be undertaken at EU level, too. This is surely the right approach.

To make sense of future policies on alcohol, the different European countries need to recognise what they have in common – which is quite a lot – and work together accordingly. National distinctiveness matters, yes, but this is one of those occasions when every country is distinctive so there is no risk of losing it.

Too much might be a bad thing, but Europe can, like alcohol, be enjoyed in moderation. If we approach it responsibly, there is nothing to fear.

The author is director of Federal Union

© EUobserver.com 2006
Printed from EUobserver.com 25.07.2006

The information may be used for personal and non-commercial use only.

This article and related links can be found at: <http://euobserver.com/9/22155>