Advancing industry interests in alcohol policy: the double game

Robin Room

What we loosely call "the alcohol industry" is not a single industry with unified interests. The interests of wine growers and of brewers often diverge, as do the interests of spirits producers, of wine importers and wholesalers, and of restaurant or pub owners. What each of these elements of the industry have in common as privately-owned companies is that they seek to maximize the return for their owners or investors, which in most circumstances means selling as much of their product as possible. Their primary purpose is the same as that described by Marion Nestle (2002, 2) for food companies: "the primary mission of food companies, like that of tobacco companies, is to sell products. Food companies are not health or social service agencies."

For any industry selling products, government matters – government at every level, including the level of the European Union. Government actions can smooth the path for industry sales or even subsidize them, as with EU subvention of wine-grape growing, and Australian and U.S. government support for wine export efforts. And, of course, government actions can also hinder sales. Government actions matter particularly to the alcohol industry, since the industry sells a product which is potentially harmful – harmful to the health of the drinker, and also harmful to the wellbeing of those around the drinker. For any government concerned with social welfare, the product is thus a magnet for attention.

Against general trends of deregulation, modern governments have been moving towards increased regulation where a product is potentially harmful to health. Thus makers of sweetened soft drinks are coming under official pressure to get their products out of school cafeterias. And European states have been moving one after another to ban cigarette smoking in restaurants and taverns. Where the potential harm involves "externalities", harm to others, the mandate for government action is even clearer. In this light, all European states have set a maximum blood-alcohol level for drivers, and the general trend for this is to be increasingly enforced. The role of alcohol intoxication in other harms is also receiving increasing attention.

Although there are also neoliberal countertrends, in our era governments are again looking at actions which will reduce or constrain alcohol sales and thus threaten alcohol industry interests. It is primarily to counter the threat of adverse government actions that different elements of the industry have formed common fronts and acted together. The most effective means for an industry to act in such situations, at least in the short run, is behind closed doors. Due to the extensive documentation made public as a result of U.S. litigation, for the tobacco industry we know a good deal about what went on behind closed doors in the past. For some other industries, there are also accounts of the backroom dealings, often by those who were at or near the policy level in government. Marion Nestle's book (2002)

on *Food Politics*, for instance, gives considerable detail about the influence of various food industry actors on U.S. government actions and policies on nutrition.

For alcohol, what happens behind closed doors has been less visible; there have as yet been few whistle-blowers among those privy to these discussions. Occasionally we catch a glimpse of what is going on. The United Kingdom, for instance, still retains a blood-alcohol level (BAL) for driving (0.8 per mille) considerably above the level recommended by the European Union (0.5 per mille). In 1998, shortly after taking power, the Blair government had proposed to reduce the BAL to the general European level. But in March, 2002, the government announced that it was reneging on this proposal. Prior to this decision, it came out, the Road Safety Minister had "had several meetings with the Portman Group, which is funded by the drinks industry and strongly opposes reducing the limit". A House of Lords Committee noted that "the department's position coincides with that of the alcohol industry but is opposed by local authorities, the police, the British Medical Association, the Automobile Association, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents, the Transport Research Laboratory, and the Parliamentary Advisory Committee for Transport Safety" (UK House of Lords 2002). The chair of the House of Lords Committee, a Labour peer, noted he "was surprised by the apparent influence of the drinks industry" (Webster 2002).

Parallel to this hidden game is the open game of influencing professional and public opinion, using a variety of methods. Here, too, alcohol industries have long experience, dating back in fact to the long fights of the temperance era and its aftermath. When the movement to develop alcoholism treatment got under way in the U.S. in the 1940s, the alcohol industry was quick to see the advantage of forming an alliance (Rubin 1979; Roizen 1991). Industry members served on the board of the U.S. National Council on Alcoholism for many years. Looking back at this era, we can see that in fact there were connections between the open and the hidden game. The industry had an implicit veto in the alliances of the open game where its main interests were at stake. The deal was, we will support your interest in developing treatment, if you stay away from advocating policies which might restrict sales of alcohol. In the view of two of the first three leaders of the U.S. National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, they were forced out by industry pressure because they broke with the deal (Room 1983).

The traditional actors from the industry side in the open game were the firms themselves, and national trade associations organized around a specific beverage type – the Distilled Spirits Council of the U.S., the British Beer and Pub Association, and so on. In the EU era, they have been joined by pan-European trade groups, such as Brewers of Europe and AICV (for cider and fruit wines). More recently, there has been a proliferation of what the industry calls Social Aspects (SA) organizations (Anderson 2002). Typically, these are organizations supported by a coalition of firms producing different beverage types, aiming to manage the handling of alcohol issues in the public arena. Besides direct public relations work, the organizations engage in a wide variety of other activities, such as commissioning and publishing reports, supporting education and public information projects, participating in professional and voluntary organizations and meetings, and sitting on government advisory committees. National SA organizations exist in at least 12 countries in Europe (http://www.efrd.org/about_us/docs/TAG_Folder_SAO.pdf). Presently, the main SA organization at an international level is the International Center for Alcohol Policy, headquartered in Washington.

There is some instability in the environment of SA organizations, particularly if they reach across alcoholic beverage types. For instance, the Beer, Wine and Spirits Council in New Zealand recently dissolved when the largest brewer dropped out (NZPA 2006). The Amsterdam Group emerged as an SA organization directing its efforts at the European Union in 1990, went into hibernation for a few years, was active again in the early 2000s, and was dissolved when the brewers dropped out in 2005. (The spirits producers stayed together in the European Forum for Responsible Drinking). Ulstein's article in this issue sheds some light on this most recent change, and offers a possible explanation of instability among the SA organizations.

One main function of SA organizations is to claim a place at the table in any open discussions of alcohol policy. But, as Ulstein argues, from the point of view of core industry interests, to be drawn into a dialogue with public health-oriented nongovernmental organizations in a context of official policymaking has some problems as a strategy in the current era. The paper by Anderson and Baumberg in this issue suggests why this is so. The literature on the effectiveness of alcohol policies in reducing alcohol-related harm has not been going in the direction of policies the industry can favour – policies which do not directly impinge on its sales and market.

Thus, at least where the discussion is in a public health framework, the alcohol industry stakeholders find themselves disagreeing on these policies with a fairly united front of the government officials and the representatives of non-governmental organizations. In this circumstance, the industry interests will be better served, at least in the short term, by a reversion to the closed-door game.

When pressures and actions concerning policy happen behind the scenes, this is evidence in itself that they would not withstand open daylight – that those with less access to power might oppose the industry influences, and might indeed, like the chair of the House of Lords committee, be surprised or even shocked at the fact of the influence. In a democratic polity, influence that stays behind the scenes is thus in the long run unstable. Ministers or commissioners or governments change, so that influence has to be rebuilt; and what happened may eventually see the light of day. For the industry, also the hidden game has its limits as a strategy.

Robin Room, Professor
School of Population Health,
University of Melbourne, and
AER Centre for Alcohol Policy Research,
Turning Point Alcohol & Drug Centre,
Fitzroy, Victoria, Australia
E-mail: RobinR@turningpoint.org.au

REFERENCES

Anderson, P. (2002): The beverage alcohol industry's social aspects organizations: a public health warning. The Globe (London) 3: 3–30. [Online: http://www.ias.org.uk/resources/publications/theglobe/globe200203/gl200203.pdf]

Nestle, M. (2002): Food politics: How the food industry influences nutrition and health. Berkeley & LA: University of California Press

NZPA (New Zealand Press Association) (2006): Lion Nathan pull-out disbands Beer Wine and Spirits Council. New Zealand Herald Dec. 1

Roizen, R. (1991): The American discovery of alcoholism 1933–1939. Ph.D. dissertation, Sociology, University of California, Berkeley

Room, R. (1983): Former NIAAA Directors look back: Policymakers on the role of research. Drinking and Drug Practices Surveyor 19: 38–42

Rubin, J.L. (1979): Shifting perspectives on the alcoholism treatment movement 1940–1955. Journal of Studies on Alcohol 40: 376–386

UK House of Lords, Select Committee on European Union (2002): Twenty-Fourth Report. London: The Stationery Office. [Online: http://www.parliament.the‑stationery‑office.co.uk/pa/ld200102/ldselect/ldeucom/140/14001.htm]

Webster, B. (2002): Drink-drive U-turn 'was under the influence', The Times (London) July 9.