

[The injustice of minimum alcohol pricing](#) [1]

Written by [Sam Bowman](#) [2] | Friday 23 March 2012



I've struggled to write something about [minimum alcohol pricing today](#) [3]. It's a hugely important issue, and one I care deeply about. But I can't help but be angry at the people who've proposed it, and the government made up of supposed 'conservatives' and 'liberals' who plan on implementing it. It's anti-individualism at its worst.

The 'evidence-based' arguments made for minimum alcohol pricing are, in fact, based on distortion and bad science. The policy is paternalistic, indiscriminate, and only hits people who are frugal or on lower incomes. Slippery slope arguments are common, for good reason. But they're especially appropriate here.

The idea behind minimum alcohol pricing is that all drinks must cost at least a certain amount per unit of alcohol in them. The figure being used right now is 40p per unit. On that 40p figure, the price of cans of (say) Becks would go up to at least £1, bottles of wine up to about £3.70, and so on.

If that sounds harmless, it's because the temperance lobby have a clever strategy. Most people won't oppose the principle of minimum alcohol pricing at such a low price level, because it won't affect what they like to drink. But once the principle of minimum alcohol pricing is in place, the minimum price will climb inexorably upward.

The politics of this are straightforward but effective: target the most marginal, 'problem' group in this case, binge drinkers with a low minimum price to pass an apparently-trivial law.

Once it's in place, raising the minimum price is like boiling a frog. Bring the heat up slowly and steadily and, before people know it, they'll be in boiling water. It's what happened with cigarette duties: now taxes account for over 80% of the price of a packet of fags.

The justifications for this are completely, utterly bogus. Britain does not have a drinking problem: as ASI fellow [Chris Snowden has pointed out](#) [4], we drink less today than ten years ago, less than a hundred years ago, and far less than we did before that.

Internationally, we are in the middle of the table in the European rankings, behind France, Germany and Spain, and far behind the Czech Republic and Luxemburg.

But what about binge drinking? In fact, the definition of 'binge drinking' has been warped beyond all recognition. Three pints of strong lager in a day counts as a 'binge' for an adult man, according to official definitions. A woman drinking two large glasses of wine is 'binging' as well.

As Chris points out, the number of diseases defined as 'alcohol related' has tripled in the last 25 years. When you change the meaning of words to suit your purposes, you can 'prove' anything.

Minimum alcohol pricing is outrageously regressive, as are all 'sin taxes', only really affecting the behaviour of people who can't afford expensive booze. In some ways this is Victorian-style paternalism, but the temperance movement of the 19th Century was about self-help and personal choice. Today's anti-alcohol 'health campaigners' are more akin to the American Prohibitionists. For them, the state is the ultimate weapon with which to impose morality on the masses.

And this, really, is why I hate minimum alcohol pricing so much. It's puritanical fascism. That fear that someone, somewhere, may be having fun can finally be eliminated using the power and violence of the state.

All of the 'evidence' in the world shouldn't undermine the basic value we place on individual liberty. The case for minimum alcohol pricing is extraordinarily weak as it is, but nothing should undermine the right to choose our own poison.

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[1] <http://www.adamsmith.org/blog/liberty-justice/the-injustice-of-minimum-alcohol-pricing>

[2] <http://www.adamsmith.org/taxonomy/term/5809>

[3] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2012/mar/23/coalition-minimum-alcohol-price-40p>

[4] <http://blogs.independent.co.uk/2011/11/15/we-should-stop-panicking-about-boozy-britain/>

[5] http://disqus.com/?ref_noscript

[6] <http://disqus.com>