

**AFFAIRS OF THE NATION**



**WATERING DOWN THE DRINKS BILL**

THE lobbying blitz by the massively resourced alcohol and retail industry was conducted by some interesting, if predictable, players and many Oireachtas members said they had never seen anything quite like it.

Diageo executives were brought into Leinster House by lobbying and PR firm Hume Brophy to meet a cross section of TDs, although most were Fine Gael. Diageo was the subject recently of a rigorous study by health academics that concluded Diageo's disingenuous campaign, Stop Out of Control Drinking (SOOCD), headed by ex-government spin doctor, Fergus Finlay, was presenting "alcohol problems and solutions in ways unfavourable to public health". There has been much controversy about the Diageo funded campaign (€1m) which claims to be most concerned at excessive alcohol consumption. But its real message was delivered to senators in the lead-up to the Seanad debate recently.

Another vociferous campaign was carried out by the Responsible Retailers of Alcohol in Ireland (RRAI) headed by former IDA chief executive Padraic White, "Independent Chairman" of the group. RRAI's offices are in IBEC's Baggot Street HQ and its website carries the IBEC logo. The picture drawn by critics of the bill is that of corner shop owners struggling to make ends meet by selling a few cans of beer. RRAI's membership list gives a different impression,

being made up of Tesco, Topaz, Aldi, Lidl and other supermarket chains.

As senators entered the hallway leading to the chamber, White engaged in intense, proselytising conversation with senators about the bill. Junior minister for health promotion Marcella Corcoran Kennedy, whose bill it is, instructed an usher to tell White to desist as he was breaching protocol in the House.

White's RRAI, as its name implies, also pushes the line of alcohol consumption restraint – but not advertising and promotional restraint. He has worked with Fionnuala Sheehan, former chief executive of MEAS, the hilariously entitled Mature Enjoyment of Alcohol in Society, about their respective "codes" on the "promotion and merchandising of alcoholic drinks".

Other heavy hitting alcohol representatives involved in the campaign include the director of the Alcohol and Beverage Federation of Ireland (ABFI), Ross Mathuna. ABFI is also big into alcohol restraint and proclaims this message on its website (which also sports the IBEC logo and address). Apparently, "ABFI is a proud member of the European Alcohol and Health Forum, which is a platform where bodies active at European level can debate, compare approaches and act to tackle alcohol related harm". ABFI's members are: Irish Brewers Association; Irish Cider Association; Irish Spirits Association; Irish Whiskey Association and Irish Wine Association.



Marcella Corcoran Kennedy

The most passionate FG critics of the bill in last week's Seanad debate were ex-junior minister Paudie Coffey, Tim Lombard and the Mayo double act, Paddy Burke and Michelle Mulherin. The proposal to separate alcohol from other products in outlets as contained in the Public Health (Alcohol) Bill 2015 is actually a neutered version of section 9 of the Intoxicating Liquor Act, 2008 which passed all stages in the Oireachtas but never commenced. A really serious measure – to prevent sports sponsorship – was lobbied out of existence by the drinks industry during the last administration. It is intended that last week's filibuster will be continued when the bill returns to the chamber. Hopefully, health minister Simon Harris will not buckle like other FG ministers have in the recent past.

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