

Key lessons from history on alcohol taxes

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Steep rises in taxes on alcohol do not necessarily reduce consumption, according to research funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) into the history of intoxicants in 16th and 17th England.

Dr Philip Withington at the University of Cambridge has found that affluence rather than poverty has tended to drive [consumption levels](#), especially among the middle classes and higher, even though legislation and enforcement is often focused on the poorer parts of the population.

"If [alcohol consumption](#) is traditionally an index of affluence, then minimum pricing will not do much to the consumption of affluent groups: rather it affects the less affluent." He said the decision in March 2012 by the Coalition Government to set a minimum price of 40p on a unit of [alcohol](#) to reduce consumption was a reverse of the principle behind traditional [price fixing](#), which had been to protect consumers from sharp rises and guarantee the availability of necessities like beer.

Dr Withington argues that it was in the 16th and 17th centuries that a recognizably modern politics of alcohol and tobacco emerged. He said that there were tensions within society in both eras that made it hard to produce effective regimes for alcohol. These included: growing commercial interests, such as beer brewers and tobacco merchants, at loggerheads with powerful reformatory bodies like the Society for the Reformation of Manners; a state dependent on the revenue from intoxicants but also determined to regulate its consumption; and a vibrant public debate over the issues but an industry resilient to government and public pressure.

"It would be nice if all members in the current debate could recognise that the structure of the politics of [intoxication](#) today is very similar to that which had emerged by 1700s'," he said. "There is unlikely, therefore, to be a final solution anytime soon." Dr Withington argues that intoxicants - including traditional alcohols and 'new' commodities such as tobacco and opium helped fuel the transition from medieval to modern society.

However, he also points out some major differences between the current situation and the past. The first is that greater gender equality means that woman drinkers have increased the number of consumers. The second is the role of the medical professions who have replaced moralists as the main drivers of reform.

Dr Withington says that while he has the utmost respect for the statistical analysis upon which the recent policy initiative rests, the Government should also take into account the historical and cultural factors which shape the consumption behaviour of different groups. They should also recognize the complexity of the issue and avoid moral panics.

"Policy makers need to be clear about what they are addressing because intoxicants are embedded in many aspects of modern life, and they can become a scapegoat for real fears about crime and disorder, medical infrastructures and costs, as well as unregulated youths" he says.

Provided by Economic & Social Research Council

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