



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Communities

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Licensing and Registration of Clubs
(Amendment) Bill: Church Representatives

10 November 2016

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Colum Eastwood (Chairperson)
Ms Michelle Gildernew (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Nichola Mallon
Mr Fra McCann
Mr Adrian McQuillan
Ms Carál Ní Chuilín
Mr Christopher Stalford

Witnesses:

Rev Adrian Dorrian	Church of Ireland
Rev Dr David Clements	Methodist Church in Ireland
Mr Lindsay Conway	Presbyterian Church in Ireland
Mr Gavin Norris	Presbyterian Church in Ireland

The Chairperson (Mr Eastwood): The witnesses will present separately. It is easier for the Committee to have you all here so that we can keep to this theme. That is easier for us. I ask you respectfully to keep your opening statements to five minutes each. Before the Committee we have Lindsay Conway OBE, secretary to the Council for Social Witness of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland; Gavin Norris, public affairs officer, Presbyterian Church in Ireland; Reverend Dr David Clements, representing the Methodist Church; and Reverend Adrian Dorrian of the Church of Ireland. You are all very welcome. Over to you guys.

Mr Lindsay Conway (Presbyterian Church in Ireland): Good morning, everyone, and thank you, Chair and members, for the invite. I also thank the Committee for inviting us to provide some input as you consider the Bill.

As you can see from the document that the Presbyterian Church in Ireland has provided, we are also a provider of services for those with addictions and support for their families, at Carlisle House in north Belfast. We also provide the pastoral care that comes with that at congregational level. At the core of what we provide is a commitment to a value: respect for dignity and compassion. We see the damage that alcohol misuse can do as we seek to foster an environment of respect, acceptance, honesty and openness. We agree that creating safe spaces in which individuals can begin that journey is significant. The desire for well-being applies to society as well. Some of you may be aware — I am not going to preach a sermon — of the passage from Jeremiah that talks about seeking the peace and prosperity of the place where you live and this is the spirit — no pun intended — in which we seek to make a contribution on issues such as this.

We state in our submission that we are not opposed to the extensions for Easter and throughout the year, as, although we do not necessarily welcome the changes, we recognise that there may be pressure for significant extensions and that what is proposed in the Bill is relatively modest. As a Church, we have to state that Easter is a significant time for many; it is a time to pause, reflect and also to celebrate. We want to say that. We do not think it unreasonable for society to mark that in a relatively small way. We note that other countries place restrictions on alcohol sales and other activities during the same Easter season and other festivals, so we are by no means unique.

On the wider extensions, again we are not opposed to what are relatively modest changes. There seems to be something of a mixed picture in terms of research, as we are aware that some studies in Australia have suggested that even short extensions have a negative effect on opening hours. However, the spirit of the Bill seems to be the right one: cautious change and a willingness to review. If the change turns out not to be a positive one, we should be willing to follow the evidence that that provides. Perhaps this offers an opportunity for Northern Ireland to contribute to research on the effect of opening hours and, in that sense, be radical. Similarly, while we are supportive of the extension of drinking-up time, given that it is designed to deal with what we recognise is a concern about the stockpiling that leads to binge drinking, we want to be cautious about it. The sunset clause is therefore welcome, and, again, if the change does not work, the Assembly should be willing to follow the evidence.

We welcome many of the measures in the Bill, particularly about supermarkets and prohibiting self-service. As we stated in our submission, health, safety and well-being must be our primary concerns. I think that we are all conscious of the allies that we now have in the health service, in criminal justice and, as we heard this morning, in the retail trade who recognise those issues, whereas, at one time, the Churches were maybe a lonely voice. Hopefully, the Bill will not just deal with the specific issues that we are talking about but will add new energy to the discussion on how we address alcohol misuse, which we all recognise is the one issue in society that has always been top of the bill in creating problems.

Rev Dr David Clements (Methodist Church in Ireland): Thank you. This is my first time at a Committee like this, so I am unusually nervous. You will see a miracle: a Methodist preacher making a presentation in less than three minutes.

Ms Gildernew: So you are not changing water into wine.

Rev Dr David Clements: If I could turn wine into water, that is what I would do. I am an old-fashioned Methodist and a teetotaler; I suppose that is a confession to make at the outset. We will largely be singing from the same hymn sheet; perhaps you will not be surprised at that. I agree with what Lindsay said in his opening remarks. I was particularly struck by the written submission from the Chief Medical Officer (CMO), whom I know in another context, and I will reuse a good deal of his material in a piece that I will write for our church on the misuse of alcohol later this year.

As we said in our brief written statement, I am not entirely unhappy with the proposed legislation. I am not supportive of any extension to drinking hours, and I noticed the interesting comment that the CMO made about the extra half hour for drinking-up time. His suspicion is that it would just mean that people would buy a few more drinks before the bell rings or whatever happens these days and take longer to drink more in the end. We welcome the sunset clause, and we will see what the evidence is. If it is helpful, fine; if it is not, it can be changed. We made other preliminary comments, and I was interested to hear you, Chair, say at the beginning of the previous presentation that minimum pricing is the big thing. The Assembly needs to look at that. Granted, it is not this Committee's or this Department's work, but we would be very supportive of that.

The specifically religious elements relate particularly to Easter. Again, we are supportive of the minimal changes. In fact, we like the idea of having a break. The Sabbath is a kind of religious principle. It is a Jewish principle, but, as Christians, we follow it too. Legislation that creates a break may be of benefit from a medical point of view, and I see that the CMO has a similar view. Maintaining those relatively limited restrictions around Easter is, I think, for the good of society.

My final point is the question of who drives this agenda. Is it commercial interests? Obviously, those are legitimate, and there will be arguments from the licensing trade and from those involved in tourism and all sorts of things, but, at the end of the day, the greater good of our society in this Province is of most concern to us as Churches and, I like to think, to the Assembly as well. Is this legislation for the well-being of society, or is it driven by commercial interests? Who will win at the end of that debate?

Rev Adrian Dorrian (Church of Ireland): I add my thanks for the chance to give evidence today. The Church of Ireland, in our approach to alcohol, is not an abstentionist Church, and one look at me would suggest that abstention is not a big thing in my life. We recognise that having a drink with friends can be a positive experience, and we certainly do not want to come from a flag-waving temperance position. That has gone through our synod and all of that. That is our official take. Broadly speaking, we would welcome or at least not stand strongly in opposition to many of the proposals in the Bill.

My guess is that you wanted to hear from us not just because we submitted evidence but because Easter is part of the make-up of the Bill. Again, I think that we are all of a position on this. We are not going to be making loud noises if the provisions in the Bill concerning Easter are moved forward, but, at the same time, our faith is about the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and our belief in that, and that is celebrated most significantly in Holy Week and at Easter. We certainly do not feel that we are in a position to say that we are in favour of any change to or extension of hours, but we will not make your life as legislators difficult if that is to happen.

Alongside that, there is recognition of the sense of Sabbath and that a break from things is good. It is the reason that, a few years ago, we did not stand in favour of extending Sunday trading. Not because we think that the swings should be tied up but because we think that having a day in the week where the routine is different can be a healthy thing for mental health, community life and family time together. At the heart of this has to be the sense of public health and public benefit that David mentioned. We will want to see a review of any changes to see whether there is an evidential basis for public health and public benefit having been approved.

One thing that runs through the legislation that we are very much in favour of is that sense of accountability, whether that is about not setting up vending machines or looking at codes of practice for the industry. The previous evidence givers had a slightly different take on it, but, when codes of practice are done well, there is a real opportunity to see everyone, and in this case perhaps the industry, making even more positive benefits to the community, and we do recognise that there are many positive benefits. A lot of our churches have got community funding from companies such as Asda and those sorts of organisations and are very happy to do so.

Accountability means that safety is built into the process that does not have to require draconian legislation, and this is not draconian legislation, and we recognise that. However, we also recognise the Chair's comments from earlier that regulation for regulation's sake is not helpful. If codes of practice are introduced and regulatory changes are brought in, it is important that they are monitored, that their effectiveness is reviewed, that they are enforced and that blind eyes are not turned. We are very grateful for the chance to be part of this conversation.

The Chairperson (Mr Eastwood): You have been so sensible that you have left me with very little to ask.

Ms Mallon: I am aware of the support and services provided for people struggling with addiction, particularly in North Belfast, and the work done with people who are very vulnerable and the homeless. How do you think that the Bill as it stands might contribute to the impact on those who suffer from alcohol addiction? When you look at the issues around alcohol addiction and spend time thinking about what leads a person to that point, they are much bigger than whether you get an extra half an hour's drinking time in a bar. Can you share your thoughts on that?

Mr Conway: From a therapeutic point of view, it is always about accessibility and how individuals get it, and, as we all know, they are experts at that. Their craft is accessing alcohol. The problem is always how they will get it, whether that be at home, in a supermarket or by proxy.

The biggest issue is that the longer the opening hours, the longer the opportunity, and the more places that they walk past as they return home, or whatever. We have a responsibility to try to restrict that as far as possible. Pricing is not the issue here, because they do not eat. They will spend every penny that they have on their booze, and it will be the cheapest. It is just about going in and finding the cheapest. This goes back to the previous debate about that, and it starts there. They will get their fix by drinking the cheapest, biggest bottle, and they will mix that with whatever comes.

The other issue always is how society looks on that. I know that it is difficult for bar, hotel and off-licence staff to say no, but it must be in the code somewhere that, if there is a suspicion that someone is well and truly incapable of making decisions, there should be some prompt to say, "We have the

right to refuse". We have all stood in queues when it has been difficult for staff to do that. It gets a very violent reaction, because you are denying addicts their fix, but that has to be part of the code or else we are just paying lip service to it. As Adrian asks, who is to be the main beneficiary of this? It has to be the community.

Ms Mallon: For us as a Committee and for me in my deliberations, it is about striking the right balance. We know that the vast majority of alcohol consumption takes place in the home. That is how you access alcohol most cheaply. Therefore, we have to weigh up the protection of the most vulnerable — those with alcohol addictions — and how this impacts on them but also the vast majority of people who, I would argue, socialise in bars and clubs but do not engage in harmful consumption of alcohol. We have heard evidence also on tourism and such things. For us, the difficulty is balancing all of that, while remaining mindful that we have to be protective of people who are particularly vulnerable.

Many of the points that you raise resonate with me. Speaking personally, this is about working through the legislation, trying to reach the right balance and coming to the right decisions. I get a bit frustrated, because, for me, the bigger debate is about poverty and mental health — things that you cannot grasp on this Committee. Thank you very much for all that you do, in your organisations and as individuals. The pastoral care and support that you provide is much valued. Thank you for coming here today. We appreciate it.

Mr Conway: We appreciate that, Nichola. Thank you.

Ms Gildernew: On a similar theme, you are all very welcome and your presentations today have been very helpful. Your written presentations were very measured, and you have been pragmatic in the points of view that you have put forward. I understand where you are coming from when you talk of a break from the daily routine. My father-in-law religiously goes off drink every Lent and will not break it. That is his thing; it is his choice. That is where we are coming from. The Bill is looking at the licensing of clubs, and Easter opening hours is something that we have been very keen to take views on from everybody who has come before the Committee. People who are really suffering from an addiction are not going to be standing outside a pub with their tongue hanging out waiting for it to open on Good Friday. They will already have been to a supermarket and bought what they need. It is a lot cheaper and is accessible for many more hours in the day. We are talking about people who choose to go out and have a drink socially with a meal or on a night out.

We want to find a way in which our licensing Bill can be modern and fit for purpose. It must recognise that not everybody wants to make the same choice. People will have their own particular religious point of view. Other religious holidays, such as Ramadan, are celebrated around the world, and people make a choice about them. I spoke at an event in London a couple of years ago, and I was conscious that, given the religious holiday that it was, people were fasting throughout the day, so I deliberately kept my comments short, because it was a really hot day, and I thought that people might faint. We are therefore conscious of people's religious beliefs and the choices that they make. However, we also need to recognise that there are people who are totally agnostic, who are not believers in religion and who want to be able to go out and have a meal and a drink on Good Friday if they want.

My remarks have been more of a comment than a question. I also make the point that for people with a serious addiction problem, whether alcohol, prescription drugs or drugs in general, a lot of it stems from other problems, such as poor mental health, abuse or neglect. I ask that, in all your work, you try to understand that, for a lot of people, their addiction is a symptom not the problem and that we have to tackle the cause of the problem. I ask that you keep that in mind. I would say that, for nine out of 10 people with severe addiction problems that any of your Churches deal with, there is a root cause.

Rev Adrian Dorrian: We recognise what you say. As I say, although we are taking a particular faith-based view on Good Friday, I do not think that you will get a lot of trouble from us on the matter.

The Churches, perhaps more than any organisation, are incredibly aware of that point in dealing with those with whom we deal, and not everybody is. There are many, many things that contribute to anyone's problems, whether it be physical health, mental health, addictions or whatever. We, as pastors, find ourselves dealing with not just the causes and not just the symptoms but all those things together. Week by week, we see people who have mental health problems that may manifest in an addiction or self-harming. This is no comment on medical practitioners, but a person who is in an emergency department or a GP surgery will be there because there is a symptom and a problem. We

have the very privileged position of dealing with people not just when they are at the low ebb but when those causative factors are part of their life. We are sometimes not as well equipped to deal with it as we would like to be, but we try our best. One of the things that we do is work closely with statutory services. Lindsay probably has more insight than I do.

Mr Conway: I will not repeat what Adrian said, but what you have raised, Michelle, is a training issue for our young people. What you are saying is very apt as to how we engage with our youth organisations. The headline news this morning was that Scouting and Guiding is good for you and for your mental health in later life. There is hope for some of us yet. *[Laughter.]* I do not know when it is going to come.

Ms Gildernew: You are not in later life yet, Lindsay. Good man.

Mr Conway: Thank you. There is a serious point to be made about how we weave that into our youth programmes and family awareness. From a clinical point of view, it is a case of the core issue versus the presenting problem. We are conscious of that, especially through Carlisle House's work in Gray's Court. There, the treatment and recovery model can be up to two years, which is fantastic and gives at least a small number that time to recover. The real skill is getting to the core, whether it is poverty, abuse, marriage break-up or whatever. Alcohol remains the main crutch that we are all used to. The one thing that we will definitely take back is that issue about young people, training and awareness.

Ms Gildernew: Alcohol is the visible main crutch. There are hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of people, a lot of them women, who are absolutely addicted to prescription drugs. That is equally as difficult a problem for us to deal with, but not through this legislation. That is just a comment on society in general.

Mr F McCann: Many thanks for the presentation. I will pick up on some of the questions that have been asked and on your presentation. As I said earlier, we are tasked with trying to find a happy medium that allows us to deal with the concerns that people have raised about the abuse of alcohol. The reality is that whole trends in entertainment and people's lives have changed dramatically over the past 10 or 15 years. The vast majority of people — some say 85% of people — do their drinking behind closed doors. In many ways, the number of people who go out to pubs now is minimal. Would it therefore not be better to try to tackle what seems to be the bigger problem, which is hidden alcohol abuse? Pubs are a more controlled way of drinking. There are many people who do not abuse alcohol but who want to go out to socialise, and many of them may do so later in the evening. It is not about saying to people, "We are controlling the way in which you want to live your life and how you socialise".

Rev Dr David Clements: That is true, but, to quote the Chief Medical Officer, alcohol is not an ordinary commodity. It is not like bread or milk. There is a lot of legislation around it, which he says sets our social norms for the use of alcohol. Loose regulation and wider availability make alcohol seem more like a part of everyday life, whereas tighter regulation and lower availability make alcohol seem more like a substance that should be treated with care and consideration.

To go back to Michelle's point, it is not just about alcoholics. They are at one end of the spectrum. Something happened, at some point, to all who are alcoholics, and their attitude to alcohol may have been shaped when they were in their early teens. The role of legislation is to help set the norms for us as a society and create some level of protection, although it will not give absolute protection. This Committee dealing with this legislation will not be the answer to everything, but some barriers and restrictions, which those who want to make money out of the business will say are holding them back, will maintain a protective element for our society. We therefore welcome the retention of some of those restrictions, if that makes sense.

Mr F McCann: It certainly makes sense, although I may not agree with it. It has been said at the Committee and I know it myself that many young people choose to drink in the house before they go out. When they go out, they may have only one drink. What they go out to do is dance. It seems that there has been a mindset change in how we socialise. I am old enough to remember when pubs closed at 10.00 pm or 10.30 pm. I was too young to drink at the time, I have to say.

The Chairperson (Mr Eastwood): It did not stop you.

Mr F McCann: Attitudes have changed dramatically over that time, and most people will go out and dance until 2.00 am, 3.00 am or 3.30 am. They will still have only one drink when they are out. It is the hidden alcohol abuse that is the most serious part of the picture today.

Mr Conway: We are all used to seeing people heading home on a Friday or Saturday night with pink or blue bags. It goes back to the points made earlier about family. As parents, we have all been there. We try to find a balance. Do we introduce our children to alcohol? If so, what is the controlled way of doing that? How does our child's peer group look on alcohol? It goes back to training and education, and maybe that is something that the Churches can engage on, because, on many things, churches are now a safer place at least to discuss these things, from the point of view of youth groups, or at women's groups, men's groups or parents' groups. I think that a lot of parents are naive and see it as a positive when they know where their children are. They think that that is the main thing, and then the young people go out at 11.30 pm. When I look back, I remember asking, "Where are you going now?", getting the reply, "We are going out" and thinking, "But they have been at home". Yes, that is a fair point.

Mr Gavin Norris (Presbyterian Church in Ireland): On Fra's point about the public and private dimension to this and on whether we should be focusing on the private rather than the public, the reports from the World Health Organization or the University of Stirling talk about reducing the overall availability of alcohol. I know that there are some who would say, "Well, maybe if we moved to 2.00 am or 3.00 am on a regular basis that would encourage a more responsible attitude to drinking". It would be good to see the evidence for that. We really need to get to the evidence. I know that some people would say, "Does that mean that they would still meet at the same time for preloading?"; in fact, they might say, "If the club is going to open for an extra hour or two, we can leave the social element to a little later".

Rev Adrian Dorrian: Preload for longer.

Mr Norris: Yes, that needs to be looked into. It is often said that the extension of hours could lead to more responsible drinking. The evidence for that needs to be shown.

The Chairperson (Mr Eastwood): Thank you all very much. That was very useful.