

## Gerry's News Digest 96: Alcohol, babies and how the world's getting better (April 5, 2012)

Hi, this is Gerry and welcome to my News Digest for Thursday, April 5th, 2012. We're a day early this time, because tomorrow is, of course, Good Friday and the beginning of the Easter weekend. On today's show I'm going to be talking about alcohol, babies and how the world is getting better. And sorry about my voice this week: I caught a virus.

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Our family will be going out for lunch on Easter Sunday this year. Traditionally we eat roast lamb, usually roast leg of lamb, and I expect we'll be having a nice glass of wine with it, but I don't think we'll be having a lot to drink before we actually go out. So we won't be "pre-loading". This is a relatively new expression, usually associated with young people, so it was a bit of a shock this week to hear our Home Secretary - that's the minister for the interior, and who's a middle-aged upper middle-class woman - stand up in the House of Commons and use this term. Pre-loading means getting drunk before you actually go out into the town, especially on Friday and Saturday nights. The Home Secretary talked about pre-loading in a more general statement about what the government plans to do about excessive drinking in this country. Excessive drinking is also referred to as "binge [1] drinking". She was talking about drinking alcohol with the deliberate intention of getting very drunk, and usually as quickly as possible. And she was referring mainly to younger people.

Britain always seems to have had a troubled relationship with alcohol. We used to try to control drinking by restricting the places and times where people were allowed to drink. But in recent years it was felt we needed a more open system. Pubs are allowed to stay open all day if they wish but in fact very few do. But the greatest change is that supermarkets are now the biggest outlet for alcohol in this country. It's the supermarkets that have made the big difference to drinking culture. Drink is much cheaper to buy at the supermarket than anywhere else, and so drinking at home has become the new norm.

Also, we're much wealthier today than 40 or 50 years ago. The cost of a pint of beer in a pub in the early 1960s was about 1/3d [2]. So that's 16p in today's money, but working people earned as little as £20 a week in those days, compared with the average of £500 today. So 16p was quite a lot of money then. If we just take account of UK inflation since 1960, the 16p pint would cost something more like £2.50 today, but at present you can buy a pint of lager in a can from the supermarket for just £1.00.

The government's new proposal is to set a minimum price for a unit of alcohol. A unit of alcohol is defined as 10 millilitres in the UK. A pint of beer usually contains about 2.5 units; 25 decilitres of red wine is about three units. It's a way of telling you how strong a drink is. The government recommendation, by the way, is that men should not drink more than 3 or 4 units of alcohol per day on a regular basis and for women it's 2-3.

So, our Home Secretary is proposing a minimum price of 40 pence per unit of alcohol. The price of a pint of beer in a pub will remain the same [3], but as I said before, the main target is supermarkets. At the moment the supermarkets do a lot of their advertising through special offers on beer and wine. It seems that they even sell some drink at a loss in order to encourage people into their shops.

So will this proposal, if it is accepted by the rest of the government and parliament, make any difference? It's difficult to say. Intuitively [4], and looking back to my youth, I have to say that price must make a difference to how much you drink. Drinking and getting drunk is very attractive to a lot of young people, and health warnings about what will happen to you when you're old don't make much sense to a 16 or 18-year-old. But if you can't afford something, you don't buy it. The drinks industry - the big companies that make and sell alcohol - are completely against this proposal, so you have to think that they expect a reduction in sales if the price is increased. The medical profession is also generally in favour of the proposal.

But I still find it difficult to work out where the truth lies in all the claims and counter-claims [5] that politicians make about drinking. The statistics tell us, for example, that people in Britain are already drinking less than they did. The number of units that young people are drinking has been falling for the last 8 or 10 years. Why? Well, nobody knows for sure, but the big health warning campaigns about the dangers of alcohol started about 10 years ago so maybe these have had an effect. There are also complaints that this new government proposal is aimed exclusively at the poorest people in our society. Rich young people will have the money they need to pay the new prices - it's only the poor who will be penalised [6].

As I said right at the beginning of this piece, we have had a troubled relationship with alcohol over the years and it doesn't look as if it's going to get any better very soon.

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In Switzerland it was in 1964 but in Britain it was much earlier - in 1920. And in France it was the year 1901 according to the figures that I found. What am I talking about? These years were record years. 1920 in England and Wales and 1964 in Switzerland were years that produced a record number of babies.

So let's put the year 1920 into context. It was not long after the end of the First World War in 1918, and more significantly perhaps, it came after the 1918 Spanish Influenza pandemic [7]. This was the sort of flu epidemic that we fear every time there are reports of a new kind of swine flu or bird flu. The Spanish Flu in 1918 killed more people than even the millions that died in the First World War. The pandemic lasted from January 1918 to December 1920. We think that between 50 and 100 million people died. 50 million people would have been 3% of the world's population at that time.

But 1920 was not a record year for deaths. It was the opposite. It was the record year for the number of English and Welsh babies born. There was a huge increase in the number of babies born that year. During the war years and then the flu epidemic, the number of babies born in England and Wales had really dropped, and then suddenly in 1920, bingo, there was this extraordinary spike [8] in the fertility rate. It didn't last. The next year the number of babies had dropped again from this record of nearly a million. The birth rate fell substantially during the 1920s until it was only about 600,000 in the 1930s. The amazing thing about this 1920 record is that it has never been broken even though the total population of the country has nearly doubled in the meantime. The situation in France by the way was that the number of births in the 20th century continued dropping from the first year for which I've seen the figures. There was also a big jump in 1920 and 1921 but France never got back to the number of births recorded in 1901.

In Britain, we had two more substantial baby booms, as we call them: one after the end of the second world war from 1947-48. And then another in the 1960s. And this is where Switzerland's record year occurred. If you were born in 1964 you are a Swiss baby boomer, one of the record number of Swiss babies born that year. It was about then that the contraceptive pill came onto the market and whether for that reason or not the birth rate really fell away in the 1970s in both Switzerland and England and Wales. The 1980s saw increases in both Switzerland and Britain, followed by a decline in the 1990s, but since the turn of the century there's been an upturn [9] again in both countries.

It's interesting to speculate about what causes these fluctuations in the birth rates. It makes sense, I suppose, that if you have a baby boom there will naturally be another about 25 years later. So the 1920 generation were among the mothers of the 1946/47/48 babies. The birth rate in England and Wales began to rise even before the end of the Second World War, and the 1940s saw a high birth rate in Switzerland from 1940 onwards and that continued through those years when the war was raging around you in the rest of Europe. And those babies then had babies of their own in the 1960s.

Another factor seems to be the economy. More babies are born when the economy is doing relatively well. I wonder if parents' decisions about starting families are based on economic conditions? Or do the babies somehow fuel the economic growth? More mouths to feed, more stuff to buy for the little ones?

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My earlier topic about excessive drinking is typical of the sort of report we get in the news. News media need bad news like we need air to breathe. Some newspapers here even seem to be based on a philosophy that the world is going to the dogs as we say - that everything in our world is getting worse and worse. They look at our society and see only corruption, stupidity, greed, violence and so on. This is one reason why I don't like to read newspapers like that: they depress me. So I was pleased to find an article the other day that listed some of our positive achievements [10]. For example, the fact that world life expectancy [11] is rising, which generally means fewer children are dying and more people are getting better health care. Secondly, extreme poverty [12] is falling. The 2000 Millennium Development Goal to halve the number of people living in extreme poverty by 2015 has already been met. Then, in more and more countries we can see signs of political reform. You may not believe it but violence and warfare [13] are declining. And birth rates across the world are falling, which is good news for the planet and for poor women. And on that uplifting [14] note, all that remains for me to do is to wish you a happy Easter, if you celebrate it. And I'll be back in two weeks. Till then, take care.

[1] binge: (verb or noun) do or the doing of too much of something (like eating or drinking)

[2] 1/3d: the UK's old money (12d = 1 shilling, 12 shillings = £1) abolished in 1971. NB I realise that I got my conversion to the new money wrong in my example. I'll explain in my next News Digest, Gerry.

[3] because pub prices are high already!

[4] intuitively: following one's immediate feelings (not based on reason)

[5] claims and counter-claims: here: statements that something is true (but for which there is no definite proof) and statements that say the opposite

[6] penalised: punished

[7] pandemic: an epidemic that affects all of a group, for example all people

[8] spike: here: a sudden upward movement followed by an immediate fall as shown on a graph (a spike = a short and

pointed piece of metal or wood)

[9] upturn: rise, increase

[10] positive achievements: successes

[11] life expectancy: the number of years that a person is statistically likely to live, how long they are expected to live

[12] extreme poverty: defined by the World Bank in 2005 as living on less than US\$1.25 a day

[13] warfare: making war

[14] uplifting: inspiring, very encouraging