

# Revisoning the Role of Alcohol in our Culture

Presented at the FASD Conference

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It has been a pleasure for me to spend time with you today and to consider our next steps in addressing FASD. My comments are intended to be summary and motivational in nature, so I won't attempt to suggest that I'm a specialist or I know what to do or how to do it. But let me begin by saying that the issue is real to me and FASD has been a present issue throughout my life and career:

- I grew up with alcohol around and family members who abused substances;
- I worked in Education in Child Welfare and have seen lots of kids with FASD;
- Worked in correctional mental health at the Washington State Penitentiary and have seen that many in the adult prison populations suffer from FASD;
- I have adopted a son who's likely exposed to alcohol and other substances prior to his birth and lived his first four months in an environment impoverished by substance abuse.

Your conference today has focused on four key themes: training and education, prevention, screening, and, intervention and supports. It is absolutely critical that this comprehensive approach be taken in response to FASD. You have also spoke much about the need for greater collaboration. Collaboration is an essential response to any complex social problem and is fundamental to the current thinking in Government and this is well articulated in the New Scotia. Figures shared today make it clear that FASD is not just an issue related to the Social Prosperity of Nova Scotians but also to the economic prosperity of Nova Scotians. People impacted by another exposure to alcohol are impeded by taking on their full role and contributors to and beneficiaries of the sustainable economic prosperity and the wealth of social and cultural experiences this affords us as citizens.

***So where to from here?*** Yes, we need to create a new vision for training and education, prevention,

screening, intervention and lifetime supports, but there is more. This conference grew out of the work that was done in Province of Nova Scotia to develop a provincial alcohol strategy. The bottom line articulated in that Strategy is clear. We need to change the culture of alcohol production, distribution, purchase and consumption, in Nova Scotia.

***What does this mean?*** Any intelligent conversation about culture must begin in a basic lesson in cultural anthropology. Peoples from all ancient societies produced and used intoxicants. In ancient stable cultural times, these intoxicants were framed within clear cultural norms and boundaries and did not contribute significantly to the social problems of the day. During times of massive social change due to radical technology shift, economic, social, and geographic displacement, intoxicants evolved into addictive social agents of control, manipulation, generation of unsustainable wealth, and, in short, corrupted us. On clear example of this, is the role distilled alcohols played in the slave trade and the colonization of North America. To this day, the people's most profoundly affected by enslavement and colonization, namely, people of African descent and aboriginal peoples, are disproportionately impacted medically, socially, and, economically by the presence of intoxicants in our society.

***So how do we correct this?*** I propose that to alter the impact of alcohol, we must control and direct the very evolution of our culture. We are no longer traditional peoples. Our culture does not and should not be allowed to evolve on it's own. Our culture must be discussed, debated, chosen, and, constructed, as we move rapidly into the future. Similarly, the role of alcohol in our culture must be considered, decided and directed. In short, we need to revision the role of alcohol in our culture. This is very similar to the work that we need to do in revisioning the role of the automobile in our culture. The crisis of global warming requires that we consciously define the role of the automobile and not simply allow the marketplace and independent choice of commuters to decide the future. So like automobiles, we need to accept alcohol presence but define it's roles. We need to institute public policies, defining and limiting it within the context of the sustainable, social, and economic prosperity that we envision for ourselves. Perhaps it will be necessary to envision the end of mass produced and marketed alcohol. Perhaps valuing the art of alcohol production as part of our cultural

heritage where micro breweries and home producers find cultural and economic places for it's production. Perhaps we need to vision a time when consumption of alcohol again becomes more socially limited and ceremonial prescribed. We need to vision a Nova Scotia where a night on the time is about great music, dancing, and eating and the enjoyment of a sample of one's favorite beverage of which one is a connoisseur. This would stand in stark contrast to the current model of drinking at home almost to the point of intoxication before going downtown, to participate in further consumption of cheap alcoholic beverages and engaging in social activity in the state of intoxication that results in social problems of violence and criminal activity, poor choices regarding ones sexual health, and, physical illness and addiction that requires both immediate and long-term medical intervention. To be realistic, we need to recognize that this envisioned culture is only possible as we promote the health, well-being, social and economic integration of all members of our increasingly diverse communities, such that alcohol ceases to be a tool to support our social and economic subjugation of each other or the place to which we retreat from the ailments from which we suffer.