# Leadership, not flippancy, needed on rural alcohol crisis

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### After the NSW Deputy Premier made a mockery of his constituents' battle with alcohol, Shanna Whan from Sober in the Country sets the record straight and calls for action.

When you are a rural woman living in the worst drought of the past century and you’re a survivor of ‘everyday alcoholism’ you feel somewhat compelled to speak out when one of your state’s highest-paid representatives is completely off the mark on the combined issues of drought and alcohol use.

I refer to Deputy Premier John Barilaro’s recent flippant slamming of experts calling for minimum pricing on alcohol as part of ongoing attempts to curb alcohol-fuelled death, injury, illness and disease.

While I can’t comment on alcohol pricing in the city - I can absolutely comment on booze in the bush because I’ve spent five years straight immersed in this very discussion, and now stand on the front lines helping other alcohol users.  It’s my life’s work.

And frankly Mr Barilaro has made a mockery of an unpalatable but real problem that claims four lives daily in NSW and one life every 90 minutes nationally.

These numbers are alarming, but they rise disproportionately as you head into the rural demographic.

*Think: drought, fear, stress, mental health decline, geographic isolation, inability to afford or access the right kind of help and now think: despair/drink/repeat. Does that help paint a picture?*

Let me clearly state that my rural advocacy isn’t about promoting a ‘nanny state’ or demonising drinking. I advocate around truth and authenticity from the perspective of a lived peer experience, so that people can make their own informed choices about using alcohol.

So I despaired this week to see Mr Barilaro manipulate a discussion about city-based late-night measures and turn it into to a political point-scoring manoeuvre among our most vulnerable bush voters.

To boot, he’s also offended and dismissed those of us who dedicate our lives to helping others, and I quote: *"Unless you have been living on the moon for the past 50 years, I'm sure we are all well aware of the impacts of drinking,’’ …. "the last thing our primary producers need is a bunch of academics telling people how to live their lives and hurting our already struggling farmers in the process."*

What I would therefore like to remind our Deputy Premier is that not ALL his rural constituents are actually aware of the impacts of drinking. But they are starting to get the message – and many are calling for leadership on this issue.

While his statement that alcohol brings in $3.3 million each year and employs 5000 people annually is true; he forgets to mention the 6,000 lives lost and the $36 million cost to our community.

In the lead-up to the 2018 state elections – and off the back of my place among the NSW/ACT Rural Woman of the Year Award finalists - I joined forces with the NSW/ACT Alcohol Policy Alliance to campaign the Premier and Deputy Premier by sharing evidence of the real costs of alcohol-related death and illness.

And we are yet receive any satisfactory response or action.

The one thing I’ll agree on with Minister Barilaro is that rural people don’t need to be ‘’told’’ how to live their lives. But what they do need and deserve is the truth and full access to facts from which they can then make their own informed decisions.

And that isn’t happening - not by a long shot.

Our Deputy Premier is so quick to discuss the *‘scourge’* of ICE addiction in regional communities and to support any lived-experience initiatives – and he talks endlessly about regional sustainability and the education of youth.

So why, you have to ask, won’t he respond to discussions around the biggest silent killer of all in our midst?

You work it out for yourselves.

"The greatest issue we face is a lack of education, a lack of fair dinkum discussion & talk about what is OK & what's problem drinking."  
  
Activist Shanna Whan ([@soberinthec](https://twitter.com/soberinthec?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw)) speaks about how more needs to be done to help curb alcohol-related harm in rural areas. [#Studio10](https://twitter.com/hashtag/Studio10?src=hash&ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw) [pic.twitter.com/ndeD8tTHhh](https://t.co/ndeD8tTHhh)

— Studio 10 (@Studio10au) [July 25, 2019](https://twitter.com/Studio10au/status/1154185933069139968?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw)

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