

Standing a round with Brigid Simmonds

It sometimes seems that the British pub is under threat from every side, not least the British public's changing tastes, but a number of organisations are manning the barricades in their defence. *The Leisure Review* met Brigid Simmonds, who in her role as chief executive of the British Beer and Pub Association now stands front and centre of the pro-pub campaign.

Brigid Simmonds OBE, chief executive of the British Beer and Pub Association, has a military bearing and the gimlet eye of a tank commander from a 1970s World War II film. It therefore comes as no surprise to learn that she has a military past and she seems like a person used to getting her own way. With a track record of senior positions in national lobbying organisations, Simmonds has established a reputation as a highly effective political operator. These skills are now employed on behalf of the trade organisation that represents over 98% of the nation's brewers

The Leisure Review met Simmonds in a public house in Westminster close by her new organisation's offices. She has only been with the BBPA since September last year but has a firm grasp on her brief which involves lobbying government on behalf of brewers large and small, beer importers and the property companies that own so many of the nation's hosteleries. Having come out of the army and cut her teeth in PR and marketing, she came to the notice of the sport, leisure, culture industry as chief executive of Business in Sport and Leisure (BISL), the umbrella body for private sector companies in the sport, leisure, hospitality and tourism sectors. BISL grew from 13 companies in membership to 111 but suffered in the economic downturn, resulting in the disappearance of Simmonds' job. However, as part of her work with the organisation had been on liquor licensing, it was not a stretch for her to take up the offer of the job at the BBPA and explains why she is drinking with us on a wet Tuesday afternoon.

Having got her feet under our table and turned down the offer of a pint of best, Simmonds explained that pubs have found themselves "in the middle of a number of debates – town centres, law and order, huge increase in taxation on beer – and there is a pressure in terms of regulation." These pressures, brought to bear to solve ills not caused by pubs – only 12% of which are in town centres, for example – have contributed to the "situation where 52 pubs were closing per week". And this despite there being what Simmonds refers to as "a good deal of sympathy" among our law-givers with the on-trade's plight.

The BBPA's response has been to reposition itself "around the clear message that beer is a low-alcohol drink of choice and should be taxed as such. 60% of all drinks sold in pubs is beer so there is a strong link between tax and the viability of pubs." The average beer strength is 4.2% ABV which means it is relatively low in alcohol. Simmonds argues that "lower taxation on lower-strength beers would encourage producers to produce them and drinkers to drink them, because they would be cheaper". Add to this the argument that pubs are the social and responsible side of alcohol consumption and the case is made that encouraging pubs and brewers by lowering tax will protect community assets and increase social cohesion. Warming to her theme Simmonds rehearses the other threats to both beer and pubs: "In this economic climate inevitably some people choose to stay at home. Supermarkets make beer and alcohol a lot cheaper. Prices of essentials, like water and electricity, have all gone up. Pubs have been affected by that." But the biggest issue for the BBPA is "regulation". The pub trade, Simmonds argues, "has been affected by regulation. The government dreams up regulations that affect pubs every day." She references the recent health-driven requirement for pubs to serve smaller measures of wine and voices the publican's complaint that as putting small measures in big glasses looks so bad restocking is required. This is one of many unintended but damaging consequences of regulation: "We don't need this micro-management of the pub environment." She acknowledges that there is a problem in town centres with youngsters setting out to get drunk but "shutting all our pubs is not the answer to the problem".

The picture of big government oppressing the impoverished but hard-working publican is of course a fallacious one and with some 25,000 of the nation's public houses owned by the much-maligned "pubcos" such as Punch Taverns, Enterprise Inns and Admiral Taverns – all of which are members of the BBPA – Simmonds must answer the charge that this form of management, where the publican is tied to the owning company, is part of the problem. Her answer is that these are business decisions and not all businesses succeed: "Some people have bought into long leases and find they have taken on something they can't sustain; a bit like negative equity. They can't sustain it in current market and it would be difficult to say to the pubco that the chap www.theleisurereview.co.uk



Brigid Simmonds discusses the business of beer in The Jugged Hare

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should be let off. People who have made this wrong decision are often in trouble." The lot of the unfortunate tenant in this situation has been improved recently with the introduction of a low-cost arbitration system for rents. It was set it up with the British Institute of Innkeepers and involves an independent surveyor arbitrating on a fair rate. The new system replaces a previously expensive review process and in addition brings in better training for pubco business development managers and for people taking on pubs.

The complexity of the issue is a common theme when beer, pubs and brewing and the various interest and interested groups representing them are involved but there does seem to be a great deal of common campaigning. Simmonds puts that down to "working really hard". She goes on to talk about the latest of the cross-industry campaigning tools and its successes: "We had a campaign when I arrived which was called 'Axe the Tax'. I realised that we had little chance of removing the tax and moved to 'I'm backing the pub' and 'Give beer a break.' This moved the campaign on and has been very successful." She points to what she calls "huge support" from parliamentarians. Recently 150 MPs signed a relevant early day motion and a lot of parliamentary candidates are offering their support to beer and pubs, a combination, no doubt, of the great concern for the future of the community pub and the politicians' awareness of it.

As Westminster suffers a virulent dose of election fever the popularity of the pub as a campaign has been shown in the appointment of John Healey as minister for pubs. He has a proper title beyond his tabloid one and Simmonds explains that essentially he is charged with "co-ordinating government's approach where the Home Office wants something, Department of Health wants something else" and pubs are involved. A welcome addition, if somewhat late in the day, which was followed between our meeting and this article's writing with an announcement of a series of measures to aid the nation's beer drinkers. The Campaign for Real Ale (CAMRA) trumpeted the changes thus: "To support community pubs, the government has announced: greater protection for pubs under threat of demolition; a ban on the anti-competitive practice of imposing restrictive covenants on the sale of pubs; greater flexibility for pubs to diversify by adding shops and other facilities without planning permission; £3 million to support community pub ownership; greater freedom for pubs to host live music without a specific licence and to reform the operation of the beer tie to ensure a fair deal for tenants and consumers a one year deadline to fully implement the recommendations of the recent business, innovation and skills select committee report on pub companies – before the government intervenes with legislation if necessary – and deliver a beer right and a free of tie option for tied tenants." Quite a set of promises from a departing government but welcome by some pressure groups nonetheless.

When Simmonds takes time off from her day job she volunteers in sport, not at her local badminton club but as chair of the CCPR, another lobbying organisation with a growing sense of purpose. Not surprisingly she sees parallels between community pubs and community sports clubs: "They are both somewhere you go when you want to participate and they are both great for young people. I'm sure we'd all much rather they were taking part in sport – or even going to the pub – than hanging around on street corners." As with her day job she has clear goals in her voluntary role. With the average sports club making £13,000 a year Simmonds is keen to expand the community amateur sports clubs (CASC) for which almost 6,000 clubs are eligible and could get 80% mandatory rate relief and tax advantages on donations. She is also keen to see sports clubs exempt from the proposed community infrastructure levy and certain prohibitive licensing changes. Beyond her new found expertise she is also lobbying for making gift aid available on junior subscriptions.

Finally the conversation turns to the London village, the imminence of 2012 and the even more imminent general election. Simmonds is of the "get your legacy in first" school of thought where the Olympic adventure is concerned: "CCPR is campaigning for an Olympic legacy of participation. We'll find it's a long sunrise and a short sunset so we need to do something now." And the prospect of a change of tenant in Downing Street? "The issue is what can politicians do for sport and pubs. It will be important to work with whoever is in government and I'm only interested in good government."

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