



## We must end problems fuelled by cheap drink

FOR any new MP, once they have taken the oath of allegiance, the spectre of their maiden speech lies ahead of them.

With more than 300 new MPs in the Commons, the decision to be made is whether to go early or wait until the rush is over.

Traditionally, MPs cannot ask questions or take part in debates until they have made their maiden speech, but this has been relaxed in view of the sheer numbers of new MPs waiting in the queue to speak.

As the National Health Service has always been my main concern and the main reason for my coming into politics, I decided to ask the Speaker if I could make my maiden speech during the health debate on the Queen's Speech. At this point, you wait anxiously to 'catch the Speaker's eye'.

Speaking in the Chamber for the first time is nerve-racking, and many new MPs decide to read aloud from a written speech.

In my view this makes for boring listening, so I decided to abandon my notes and speak from the heart. While it is more likely that your audience stays awake, it does mean that you miss many finer points of detail.

Traditionally, the MP's maiden speech first describes the constituency he or she represents. Although I made clear that our picturesque countryside and spectacular coastline attracts tens of thousands of tourists, I also said its beauty conceals many social problems.

Our farmers are suffering greatly from the effects of the bovine TB



■ VICIOUS CIRCLE: Pubs can't compete with cheap supermarket alcohol

epidemic, and I reminded the House that, despite more fish being landed at Brixham than any other port in England, the local fishing industry is experiencing considerable hardship as a result of the controls enforced by

the European Union's Common Fisheries Policy.

I paid tribute to the work of the staff and volunteers in our four community hospitals, and also praised Transition Town Totnes for its efforts in

planning for a future without cheap or abundant oil: but what grabbed the headlines were my comments about the need for a minimum price for alcohol.

Minimum pricing is now supported by all the key medical and social experts in the field of alcohol harm reduction.

There is now overwhelming evidence linking the amount of alcohol we drink with its low pricing and availability.

It is not surprising that very cheap alcohol leads to so many sliding into alcohol dependency. The problem is that this has led to an explosion of anti-social behaviour and real harm, not just to those who become problem drinkers, but to those around them.

We all wish we could end the problems of alcohol-fuelled crime and violence. The annual figures are compelling; alcohol abuse is a major factor in half of all murders and 125,000 incidents of domestic violence, and around a million assaults are alcohol-related.

We must also bear in mind that excessive drinking is associated with relationship breakdown and abuse, poor parenting, unsafe and regretted sex, truancy, anti-social behaviour and homelessness.

The cost to the country is at least £20 billion a year, but the real costs to individuals and families are immeasurably higher.

There are 1.3 million children in our country suffering as a result of a family member misusing alcohol. To these depressing figures we must add

the 16 per cent of road deaths that are caused by drink-driving.

We can continue to wring our hands, or we can look carefully at the evidence to bring about a solution to the problem. Multinational studies are very clear; licensing and pricing must be addressed.

Nobody wants to see our traditional British pubs go out of business, but this is happening because they cannot compete against ultra-cheap supermarket alcohol.

Tesco has accepted that this is a problem and would like to stop selling cheap alcohol. However, it has been pointed out that if it is to avoid prosecution for price-fixing, then it will require new legislation to allow supermarkets to adopt minimum alcohol pricing.

I know that many people worry that minimum pricing will penalise low-income moderate drinkers, and I can understand that fear.

I am not suggesting that we adopt high Scandinavian alcohol prices but that we set the pricing at a level that will stop ultra-cheap alcohol sales.

Research shows clearly that minimum pricing targets heavy drinkers and under-age drinkers and does reduce their use of alcohol.

We need to stop the carnage on our streets caused by drinkers who 'pre-load' with cheap booze before they even arrive at the clubs and pubs.

If it means that a bottle of wine will cost £4.50 instead of £4, but in return our homes and streets are safer, then that will be money well spent.