

Gippsland by-election targeted by alcopop makers

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Reporter: Jane Cowan

MARK COLVIN: The hottest topic in the south-east corner of Victoria is not alcohol but water, and the lack of it.

But the makers of pre-mixed spirits are trying to make the new alcopop tax an issue in the coming Gippsland by-election.

They're running ads calling on the Federal Government to do away with the tax, and they admit it's a blatant attempt to use the by-election to further their cause.

Observers say it's an unusual tactic on the part of a lobby group, and they doubt that it will work.

Jane Cowan reports.

JANE COWAN: In the ad set to hit TV screens in Gippsland, a man wearing a flannel shirt chops wood beside his ute.

(Excerpt of advertisement)

(Sound of wood being chopped)

ACTOR: Kev, Wayne. I'm angry about the new tax on pre-mixed drinks. I'm not a binge drinker. And I've got plenty of mates who think this tax slug has really missed the mark.

(End of excerpt)

JANE COWAN: The message couldn't be clearer.

(Excerpt of advertisement)

ACTOR: We feel like we're getting ripped off for no good reason. So we're going to use this Gippsland by-election to send you blokes a message.

Kev, Wayne, are you listening?

(Sound of axe chopping)

Chop the tax on pre-mixed drinks.

(End excerpt)

JANE COWAN: Doug McKay is the executive chairman of the group Independent Distillers of Australia which represents the makers of pre-mixed drinks.

DOUG MCKAY: Gippsland is a particular opportunity with the by-election obviously for engagement with politicians and their constituents. And this an opportunity to have the discussion with your politician about where they are on the RTD (ready to drink) tax.

JANE COWAN: Brian Costar specialises in politics at Swinburne University. He says these ads amount more to lobbying than any kind of real campaigning.

BRIAN COSTAR: I don't think it's got much to do with the attempt to influence the outcomes in the Gippsland by-election. I think it's just an interest group taking an opportunity.

JANE COWAN: How unusual is this?

BRIAN COSTAR: I think it is pretty unusual, I haven't seen it happen before. After the election presumably the result is that the Labor Party candidate doesn't win the seat then they will say □Ah, he didn't win the seat because we ran these ads and the Government's policy is very unpopular□. So I mean it's an innovative tactic.

JANE COWAN: Professor Costar says one of the defining features of the by-election that's been caused by the departure of the Nationals' Peter McGauran is that it's been fought on very local issues.

BRIAN COSTAR: I don't think that alcopops is quite a local issue in terms of what's being going on down there.

JANE COWAN: What do you think voters in Gippsland will make of their by-election being used in this way, when there are certainly other issues that would be at the forefront of their mind?

BRIAN COSTAR: I think they'd be puzzled. I think if there's an overwhelming local issue, other than good representation, water is probably the big local issue.

It takes a number of manifestations down to blue-green algae in the Gippsland Lakes. A de-sal, proposed de-sal plant, which while technically not in the electorate, is close enough to make an impact. And there's lots of arguments about water harvesting. Gippslanders are concerned about water.

Labor lost two seats there in the last state election. And again if there was a clear issue that could be disentangled from the rest, it was concerns about water.

JANE COWAN: Of the five candidates running in Gippsland, Brian Costar predicts the Nationals' Darren Chester will win, albeit with a drop in the National's primary vote.

Professor Costar is not sure whether the distillers will see that as a win.

BRIAN COSTAR: It might just be an experiment. They're going to try it out, if they can get some mileage out of it, they'll do it again and other groups will do it again. But I'd find it very hard to believe they're going bang for the buck out of it.

What they want to do at the end of the day is to say our ads on this issue had an influence on this by-election, and therefore the Government better take notice of us.

If I was the Government, I wouldn't take notice of them at all. I mean I couldn't think of a longer bow to draw to make an association between that ad and the outcome in the by-election.

MARK COVIN: Political commentator Professor Brian Costar from Swinburne University. Jane Cowan was the reporter.