Stick to beer

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Opinion



In these politically complex times, the value of a great beer in a good pub can’t be overstated. It’s here, within the heart of a proper community local, that people with different viewpoints and opinions can come together and, in a friendly and considered way, hash it out over a few pints. While heated, it’s surely a thousand times better than sitting at home on your own, staring at a screen and having a slanging match with some bloke from Alabama. But to what extent should pubs, beer festivals and the businesses that supply them also take political stances. And, indeed, how should consumers respond to them? Pubs are, frequently, sites of political neutrality, but these same spaces are now becoming increasingly polarised as political discourse becomes more intensely fraught. Where, then, does that leave the people who use them, and indeed those who work there? At a recent CAMRA-organised festival in the South Manchester borough of Chorlton, any remaining purchased beer tokens could be placed in a deposit box on exit. Leftover funds were to be donated to Medical Aid for Palestinians (MAP) – a cause I, personally, was happy to support when I visited. But I also understand not everyone would be happy or willing to do the same, with the chosen cause potentially inviting challenge from those whose political beliefs might not align with those of the festival organisers. Would it not have been easier to simply remain neutral? Honestly, no. This is a reflection of how everywhere and everything is becoming increasingly politicised, as a constant stream of bad news is continually live streamed to the supercomputers we keep in our pockets. But more than that, it’s a reflection of how important it is to care about, and act upon, what’s in that news. In the UK, several breweries have been under recent scrutiny for failing – in their customer’s eyes – to show a certain level of neutrality. Both Vocation brewery in Hebden Bridge and Vault City of Edinburgh came under fire recently when it was discovered they were supplying beer to a bar in Tel Aviv, Israel. After the information was published online, and following significant consumer pressure, both breweries eventually announced that they have already, or would be ceasing trade with the business. Another business to come under fire is Bristol’s Moor brewery. When its founder and majority shareholder, Justin Hawke, posted on Facebook in support of the Israel Defence Force (IDF) people were quick to explode into outrage. This immediately put the staff at Moor under fire, forcing an apology from both the brewery and Hawke himself. Despite this backtracking, it arguably caused a level of reputational damage that will be difficult to recover from, at least in the short-to-medium term. Several Bristol stockists, including the Swan With Two Necks in St Judes, quickly responded in kind by delisting the brewery. At this particular pub it was announced proceeds from the sale of the remaining stock would also be donated to MAP. Where do consumers, and indeed beer businesses decide to draw the line? In just a few weeks several breweries from the United States of America will be pouring beer at the London Craft Beer Festival. With the Great British Beer Festival moving to Birmingham, this will easily be the largest fest in the capital. But with the United States’ own challenging political situation hogging the headlines, will customers also choose to boycott, or voice their discomfort of beers from this country being made available? Well, of course not. Just because a brewery is visiting from the US doesn’t mean its owners support the stance of its government, does it? What does remain powerful, regardless of your position, is compassion. In modern political discourse it’s perhaps the first approach to go out the window when things get a little spicy. But it is because of compassion, not malice or spite, that the volunteers of Trafford and Hulme CAMRA opted to have the donation box in the first place, and it is compassion that motivated attendees to make a donation as they leave. It is compassion that triggered the response from customers when they found out beer from breweries they admired were selling beer into a market they didn’t. And it is because of compassion that you’ll struggle to find Moor Beer on tap in Bristol at this very moment. It would be far easier, surely, to stick to beer, and leave the politics to the politicians. But in fact, sometimes the most compassionate thing you can do is stick your head above the parapet and say, “I don’t think this is okay.” Sure, maybe it would be easier to wind our necks in, but actually, all beer is political, and so are the pubs we drink it in. As consumers we get to make compassionate choices about what, and where, we choose to drink. That means the people who make and sell those drinks should, at the bare minimum, make the same effort as their customers.