



Up in Smoke

BY Sasha Borissenko

The Ministry of Health recently issued a paper calling for **\$100 packets of cigarettes**, in an effort to make NZ smoke free by 2025.

Combined with moves to plain packaging, and a massive and continuing advertising campaign to get smokers to quit, **it appears smokers are under siege in the land of the long white cloud.** Critic's Sasha Borissenko looks into the Ministry's plans, the state of anti-smoking efforts, and what it's like to be a smoking social pariah.



THE SMOKE-FREE ENVIRONMENTS ACT 1990 WAS PASSED to prevent the effects of passive smoke by restricting cigarette smoking in certain places. While it is New Zealand's most instrumental smoke-free policy, it arguably cultivated a hostile attitude towards smokers. Bystanders ask smokers not to smoke for fear of their own health, rather than promoting an environment that encourages smokers to quit for the benefit of the community. This selfish, individualistic proposition might be a little leftfield but stigmatising and treating smokers as inherently bad needs to be addressed.

Perhaps it is the early programming of Mummy dearest uttering the words "you'll die" or a backlash against enduring Catholic schooling that compels me to bat for smokers in general. Nonetheless, it should be noted that unlike alcohol, narcotics, poverty or mental illness, Jake the Muss never beat up his kids after downing a packet of Marlboro Reds.

WHAT'S THE DEALIO WITH BIG BAD SMOKERS?

PERSONAL AUTONOMY AND FREEDOM OF CHOICE tend to be the neo-liberal buzzwords for anti-smoke-free hipsters. As of February 2013, a Pennsylvania hospital in the USA will no longer hire smokers in a bid to fully implement its smoke-free policy. Nicotine tests will be used to screen applicants for cigarettes, smokeless tobacco, nicotine gum and patches. This seems like overreaching into the private sphere. Will the government next be trying to regulate sugar, fat or, heaven forbid, alcohol intake; will rowing, high-heeled shoes and one-sided handbags be restricted for the sake of reducing ACC claims?

Still, there is overwhelming evidence that smoking is bad for you. The Ministry of Health states, "Tobacco use is the leading cause of preventable death in the world and New Zealand. It is responsible for the death of one in ten adults worldwide. It

kills over 4500 New Zealanders every year, including around 350 from exposure to secondhand smoke". With this in mind, staunch Otago graduate Mark Norman claims that "smokers are a drain on the health system and are bad"; or, better yet, "if you smoke you deserve to die a slow and painful death." New Zealand's tobacco control programme spends \$85 per smoker per year. Arguably, however, putting a price on the cost of health belittles the problem and dehumanises smokers. One could equally argue that smokers benefit the economic community because they tend to die earlier and fail to reach the pension age. Sensationalist arguments are endless. Slaves to the cigarette must of course quit, but how can this be done in a non-discriminatory and productive way?

In an attempt to find and interview victims to the butt, a self-proclaimed smoking enthusiast (we'll call him Don Draper, Jr)

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offered his services. The Dunhill lover "[has] always enjoyed the act of smoking ... the skill set [of rolling your own] always appealed to me." He says, "it's an outsider sort of thing, an outlet for contrariness. It's kinda cool again." Draper Jr feels apathetic towards the current strategies in place, concluding he would "probably end up crumbling under the great weight of the man" when asked whether he would quit the habit. "I am at peace with the potential health ramifications ... it is almost a fatalist attitude. [But] I don't see myself smoking indefinitely, I plan to quit sooner rather than later."



HOW TO GET 'DIE-HARDS' TO QUIT?

SUPPOSE DRAPER JR WERE TO QUIT? CRITIC SPOKE TO QUITLINE'S SENIOR COMMUNICATIONS Advisor, Sarah Woods, to assess his options. Quitline offers a three-step programme for the 52,000 smokers who seek help annually; this seeks to manage the addiction through 1) chemical substitutes, 2) habitual replacement therapy, and 3) making infrastructural changes to one's emotional attachment to the drag.

Emotional attachment to cigarettes, argues Woods, is attributable to the fact that "higher levels of smoking is prevalent in lower socio-economic demographics." In fact, "increased stress felt by low status groups in in-egalitarian societies have relevance to smoking since it has frequently been argued that smoking is a way of relieving stress," says University of Canterbury's Ross Barnett. In other words, it is the oppressed or most financially disadvantaged members of society who tend to steer towards cigarettes.

If it is not for financial, family or health reasons, Woods believes one of the reasons there are fewer quitters stems from the belief that there "needs to be an environment that encourages people to get help ... people wishing to quit might feel quite alone. People sometimes feel embarrassed to seek help so we want to encourage them to come to us. We are not here to judge them." Furthermore, while chemical replacements such as nicotine patches are subsidised through certain health providers, the Ministry-funded agency says such substitutes are not free over the counter or at local retail outlets. Of the people who suddenly decide to quit by themselves, they have only 2-5% success rate, compared to a 20% success rate of those who seek support services.

HARK! MEDIA FRENZY OVER PLAIN PACKAGING.

THANKS TO THE WRATH OF MAORI PARTY CO-LEADER TARIANA TURIA, Cabinet has agreed in principle to introduce a plain packaging policy as part of New Zealand's smoke-free strategy by 2025.

The big corporate giants squirmed with school playground rhetoric when plans for the New Zealand government to follow Australia set sail. Philip Morris, Imperial Tobacco and British American Tobacco (BAT) are all of the belief that plain packaging is an "ineffective strategy" and will lead to the expansion of a New Zealand tobacco black market. British American Tobacco New Zealand stressed the company would "take every action necessary" to protect its "intellectual property rights."

Meanwhile, Philip Morris believes the proposition "violates numerous international laws and trade treaties." New Zealand could face serious opposition by US companies who could directly challenge the actions under the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement. The US Chamber of Commerce threatened the initiative might lead to a "possible impact on New Zealand exports, such as dairy and wine, should other governments feel emboldened to take similar measures".

With great gusto, Turia, the Associate Minister of Health, has insisted the regime would not be contrary to any international instruments and "we shouldn't be allowing tobacco companies to determine our domestic law. Our interest is not in profit, it is in the health and well-being of our communities."

WHAT ABOUT THE 'QUITTING' QUITTERS?

While using a standardised font with simple health warnings would logically reduce the appeal of smoking for teenagers in principle, is there actually a need for this recent development? If the appetising gangrenous foot on the back of most packets doesn't deter the stereotypically indifferent audience, wouldn't a dull pack be more likely to bore the Bieber-loving demographic into submission? Draper Jr believes plain packaging "misses the point." The 19-year-old believes "it is insulting to think we do not realise the effects of marketing ... it is just one of the many facets of belonging to a nanny state."

The initiative fails to actually address the problem of "die-hard" smokers. The prospect is aimed at preventing new comers to the trend whereas slaves to the "butt" are unlikely to give a "fag" about plain packaging. If anything, the kids seem to be alright according to the Anti-Tobacco Charity's 2011 Year 10 smoking survey. Results show youth smoking rates are the lowest recorded since 1999, showing 4.1% in 2011, compared to 5.5% in 2010.

What's more, the annual-increasing "sin tax" indirectly targets the large proportion of addicted smokers who are subject to financial strife. An all-time controversy high occurred recently, when the Ministry of Health issued a discussion paper proposing that the price increase annually until it reached \$100. Since the 12% excise hike in 2010, however, tobacco sales dropped by 14.7% according to the Ministry of Health. Tariana Turia argues, "With 44% of Maori still smoking ... the party makes no apology for tax increases that hit the poor hardest."

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Despite the worthy cause, the status quo and recent packaging developments are just further examples of the underdogs of society being indirectly targeted. Arguably, tobacco sales can be ended by 2025 by making cigarettes less affordable, less available and less satisfying. More importantly, however, the perception and emphasis must change its course towards a more supportive environment for smokers, so that quitting seems more attractive.

Which begs the question, if Johnny Depp can pull off the electric cigarette and command the likes of Angelina Jolie, why can't those unfortunate individuals who stand below the giant Smoke-Free sign at Dunedin Hospital, durry in one hand, IV drip in the other?