

# Smoke and mirrors

Ash and ye shall receive....

AMERICANS, AND TO A lesser extent Canadians, are fond of belabouring their rights-- the perception being that people usually have the right to live their lives however they wish so long as they don't harm anyone.... anyone but themselves, that is. Of late, the courts have even been debating the proposed right of individuals to kill themselves if they so desire. In a way, such extremism in the name of individual rights is only the logical end of an already reckless disregard for citizens' well-being out of deference to their right to harm themselves and others--specifically, the surprisingly enduring habit of cigarette smoking. In an advanced society where many potentially dangerous drugs and substances are illegal or otherwise inaccessible, convention and mercenary interests combine to make smoking an undeniably dangerous but still legal pursuit, one which incurs incalculable human and financial losses in our country every year.

None of the above tale of woe is news to most readers. What is news, though, is the government's latest craven concession to the tobacco industry: a proposed tax reduction for cigarettes that would virtually halve their price for the consumer.

Cigarettes and tobacco are heavily taxed for obvious reasons: to try to discourage people from a physically self-destructive habit, and to use the tax revenue to bolster the sadly depleted government coffers. This eminently reasonable measure has helped contribute to the steady decline in smoking, boosting government funding and saving millions in health care costs and other financial losses attributable to smoking. Why, then, would a government endanger its own finances and the health of its citizens by discontinuing such a policy?

The well-publicized reason for the government's cowardice is cigarette smuggling. As deadly as smoking is,

those addicted to it will often do virtually anything for their cigarettes, even though fewer and fewer people can afford to buy cigarettes as a result of government taxation. The result is a lucrative and swiftly growing trade in black market cigarettes, chiefly from the United States. Canadian cigarette manufacturers sold over five hundred million dollars worth of cigarettes to the U.S. last year, and an estimated 80-95 per cent of the exports will be smuggled back into Canada via unlicensed dealers and organized crime. Much of this is sold to Canadian "middlemen", especially

on neighbouring Indian reserves, and resold to consumers at a fraction of open-market price, with no taxes going to the government.

In the face of rampant smuggling, the federal government is discussing a major tax rollback to try and make cigarettes more affordable and thereby discourage smuggling. That in itself is a worthy goal, but the federal and provincial politicians considering this course of action seem to be losing sight of their original intentions, to say nothing of their practical and ethical credibility, by bowing to pressure from criminals and special interest groups.

The tobacco industry has been lobbying government for lower taxes

for years, and there is widespread speculation that tobacco manufacturers encourage smuggling-- for profit (by sheer volume of export sales alone) and to pressure the Canadian government into lowering taxes. If that is true, they are succeeding, and it is nauseating to see elected officials allowing themselves to be bullied by

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criminals and lobbyists in the formation of policy.

Despite the economic inconvenience to consumers and producers of cigarettes, heavy taxes have proven an effective and lucrative deterrent in the

campaign to discourage people from smoking. A recent radio show received numerous calls to this effect, including messages from smokers, one of whom admitted that he probably never would have started smoking in his youth if cigarettes had been as expensive as they now are. Cigarettes are dangerous, unhealthy materials, and making them expensive is the next best thing to making them inaccessible, which should be the ultimate goal of any government that feels truly responsible for the health of its citizens.

Beyond the moral obligation to public safety, the taxation of cigarettes makes sense from the simplest and most influential of perspectives: money.

Not only does the government take in millions from cigarette taxes, but discouraging the habit potentially saves our health system millions of dollars spent in the treatment of smoking-related illnesses. Since the government is talking about slashing cigarette prices virtually in half, any money saved from a possible reduction in smuggling would probably be devoured and then some by the lost taxation revenue and the longterm health costs incurred by smokers. A tax rollback simply makes no sense.

Most importantly, governments should have the strength to serve their citizens responsibly rather than bowing to lobbying and a situation that is little more than economic terrorism. Some federal MP's and provincial ministers are breaking ranks and speaking out against reducing cigarette taxes, and are to be commended for it. Expediency is not a justification for compromise, and the politicians who are quick to knuckle under risk compromising themselves and the trust placed in them by a public whose best interests they are failing to serve. If this is an indication of things to come, Canada's much-touted renewal of integrity in politics may soon go up in smoke.

Sean McQuaid  
Overtaxed Editor

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