ON THE CONTRARY **Tony Delamothe**

Deaths from smoking: the avoidable holocaust

Start by kicking British American Tobacco and Imperial Tobacco out of the country

At the beginning of the 20th century hardly anyone smoked cigarettes. By 1948 82% of men in Britain were smoking some form of tobacco. By 2009 only 22% were. Extrapolate forwards this rate of decline and by 2031 Britain should have no male smokers. (Women are on a slightly different trajectory.)

Would that it were so simple. A meeting to mark the 50th anniversary of the Royal College of Physicians' report *Smoking and Health* offered three main messages on how change on this scale was achieved. Firstly, there was no single magic bullet: controls on marketing and sales, health warnings on packs, and prohibition of smoking in public places all played a part. Secondly, legislation worked much better than persuasion. And lastly, tobacco companies fought the controls every step of the way.

Yet these companies are purveyors of death on an industrial scale. In the 50 years since *Smoking and Health* smoking has killed six million people in the United Kingdom. It remains the country's number one cause of premature death, responsible for killing about 100 000 people a year.

Outside the UK the figures are even more mindboggling. They're to be found, along with much else, in the 20th anniversary issue of *Tobacco Control*, published this month. Smoking's worldwide toll is predicted to reach six million deaths a year by 2015 (*Tobacco Control* 2012:21:87-91). About 100 million people died from smoking in the 20th century—twice as many deaths as Stalin, Hitler, and Pol Pot were together responsible for. Several times that number are likely to die this century, even if current rates of smoking fall dramatically. Such a decline seems unlikely, given the tobacco industry's shift of marketing focus from heavily regulated developed countries to unregulated developing countries—with their largely youthful populations.

The latest skirmish between the tobacco industry and its opponents—over plain packaging—combines the usual elements: tobacco companies using the courts to try to overturn legislation, supportive reports from free market think tanks that are not quite as candid in documenting their tobacco industry funding as they might be, and onlookers poised to follow any leader's success.

First out of the breach this time is Australia, which legislated to introduce plain cigarette packs in December. Four companies have taken its government to Australia's High Court. Watching closely is Andrew Lansley, England's secretary of state for health. He told the meeting at the Royal College of Physicians that his department was about to publish its consultation on tobacco packaging: "We are the first country in Europe to be giving that idea serious consideration, and that's something we can be very proud of."

The Adam Smith Institute, a free market think tank, has got its retaliation in early. Its killer criticism is the absence of solid evidence for the effectiveness of plain packaging, which is self evidently true, as no one has tried it before (*BMJ* 2012;344:e1269). Its ideological stable mate, the Institute for Economic Affairs, is putting the finishing touches to its own report on plain packaging. Behind them the right wing blogosphere is gearing up for the fight.

Debates over smoking are usually couched in terms of individual liberty versus the nanny state. At stake is "the freeborn Englishman's right to go to hell in his own way," as someone said at the meeting. Freeborn the victims may be, yet most smoking related deaths in the UK occur among its most disadvantaged groups. Many were regular smokers by the age of 15.

In 2000 a World Health Organization committee of experts judged tobacco use unlike other threats to global health: "Infectious diseases do not employ multinational public relations firms. There are no front groups

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to promote the spread of cholera. Mosquitoes have no lobbyists" (www. who.int/tobacco/en/who_inquiry. pdf). With such help, tobacco companies' profits are growing year on year, with the UK companies British American Tobacco and Imperial Tobacco outperforming the UK stock market since the crash of 2007.

Shouldn't we care about the product as well as the share price? Stewart Brock raised the alarm in these pages last year: "We may be world leaders in tobacco control at home, but we are exporting tobacco related death and disease to the developing world on a large and growing scale, cheered on by many in the City" (*BMJ* 2011;343:d6491). It's an uncanny echo of the opium wars, when British traders jemmied open the Chinese market to opium imports, robustly supported by the British government, all in the name of free trade.

Could this government act faster than the last to undo such an obvious wrong? In his speech to the royal college Mr Lansley painted himself as an enemy of "the vested and commercial interests of the tobacco industry." He said, "My objective is to achieve smoke free communities; theirs is to make a profit from selling intrinsically harmful products. We don't have common ground."

Here's a suggestion for Mr Lansley. Boot the manufacturers of these "intrinsically harmful products" out of the UK. If Robert Proctor is right that one death results from every million cigarettes smoked, with a latency of about 25 years (*Tobacco Control* 2012:21:87-91), then British American Tobacco and Imperial Tobacco will between them be responsible for one million deaths a year by 2035. As two of the UK's largest companies they're currently fawned over and indulged. They should be shown the door. Their presence in this country shames us all.

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