

Smoke and Mirrors

By Theodore Dalrymple

I hold no brief for the tobacco companies and have no shares in them. I detest the habit, perhaps because my father smoked an evil pipe whose product had been well described by James I in his anti-smoking diatribe of 1604, [*A Counterblaste to Tobacco*](#). It (my father's pipe) emitted a "horrible Stygian smoke of the pit that is bottomless," but this had at least the beneficial effect of immunizing me against any temptation to smoke.



I also believe that my right to breathe air free of tobacco smoke trumps any rights of smokers to smoke, though I also concede the right to smokers to smoke in their own premises or far from me, and for there to exist public premises in which

smoking is permitted and which nonsmokers may enter if they so wish.

The social world was once so suffused with cigarette smoke that we did not notice it: clothes, curtains, everything must have smelt like an ashtray. Nowadays, the smoke of a single smoker five yards away is enough to cause us discomfort, so sensitive have we become. On the whole, I count this an improvement; but if a guest of mine were to ask permission to smoke, I should grant it, the laws of hospitality being more important to me, at least in the short term, than those of health.

Despite this concession, I could hardly be counted as a member of the tobacco lobby or as a paid agent of what is sometimes called Big Tobacco. Nevertheless, when I saw that the tobacco

companies were to pay C\$33 billion to smokers and provincial governments in Canada, I thought that this was emblematic of the intellectual and moral corruption into which much of the Western world has sunk.

The payment was to be made because the tobacco companies marketed their wares dishonestly. They thereby caused damage to millions of their customers and, through the illnesses caused by smoking, obliged the provincial governments to spend extra billions on health care. In addition, ill health before retirement age caused by smoking led to lost production.

Actually, the economic calculation is a complex one, since smokers die earlier than nonsmokers, and thereby reduce the cost of pensions, an important consideration where people survive retirement for decades. On the other hand, smokers often have to retire early because of their illnesses caused by tobacco and have to be treated for chronic diseases they would not otherwise have had. On the other, the tobacco industry creates employment and above all generates immense revenues for governments.

The fact is that governments have benefited more from the consumption of cigarettes, at least in absolute terms, than have the tobacco companies. The cost of cigarettes varies between provinces in Canada, but in some 73 percent of the cost of a pack is tax, the lowest rate being 61 percent. (In Britain, it is 82 percent.) The governments collect this tax without the cost and bother of having to produce cigarettes.

Since consumption is to some extent dependent on price, it is probable that governments have sought to adjust prices to lower consumption while maintaining tax revenue. This is an instance of the putting into practice of the great dictum of the French comptroller of finances under Louis XIV, Jean-Baptiste Colbert, that the art of taxation is to pluck the maximum of feathers from the goose that produces the minimum of hissing.

Thus, the principal financial beneficiary of smoking has in effect extorted money from the producer of that benefit, namely the tobacco industry. Whatever the misdeeds of the latter, this is a morally disgusting manner of proceeding, especially when the principal beneficiary was always in a position to prohibit smoking as it has now in part done.

As to the poor smokers themselves, they have all done themselves harm knowingly, for it is more than half a century since it has been known that smoking is very bad for health. The general population may be ignorant of many things, but one of the things that everybody knows, though they may not know the date of the Battle of Hastings or the American Declaration of Independence, is that smoking is bad for you. In the past fifty years I, at least, have never met anyone who did not know it. Moreover, ever since Mark Twain said that giving up smoking was the easiest thing in the world to do because he's done it hundreds of times, it has also been known that smoking is addictive.

Nor does addiction mean that it is impossible by an effort of will to give up smoking, for millions of people have done so, among them both my parents.

Thus, neither the known fact that smoking is addictive, nor the false assumption that addiction creates a habit impossible to break, creates a moral liability on the tobacco companies. The tobacco companies are targeted for extortion (a) because large companies that make profits are unpopular with the majority of the population, however much the population benefits from them, and (b) because governments seek to increase their revenue without resort to further taxation, which is equally unpopular, because they are unwilling or unable to balance their budgets, so much have they promised their electorate. I say this without asserting that giant corporations never do anything wrong: They are run by humans, with all the temptations and vices that humans have.

The most moral solution to the problem would be taxation of (a) government workers who have for decades benefited from the sale of cigarettes, despite the power of the government to prohibit the sale of cigarettes, and of (b) smokers who, notwithstanding their knowledge that smoking was bad for them and thereby created supposed obligations to assist them when the consequences of their voluntary habit strike them, have chosen still to smoke.

This latter tax would, of course, fall mainly on the (relatively) poor, as does the tax on smoking, because it is they who are in present circumstances the most likely to smoke. But justice is justice, not something else; and justice entails desert. We must follow arguments where they lead.

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