

EDITORIAL – October 3, 2017

We should beware of ceding tobacco to the criminals

No one who has watched a loved relative die of a smoking-induced disease will have much sympathy for the tobacco industry. To see someone with emphysema fighting for every breath, or to watch the painful decline of someone with lung cancer – these are harsh lessons that change lives. Smoking doesn't just kill; it kills with pain, horror and indignity. Many people will thus understand and sympathise immediately with Andrew Forrest's new anti-smoking campaign, intended to cut youth smoking and make the industry pay for some of the damage it causes. But are they right? Is this the most effective way to reduce smoking, and the harm it causes, to the minimum possible?

There is a balance to be struck here between discouraging smoking and banning it altogether. Tobacco and its use should not be banned. Bans on drugs do not work. They produce disastrous consequences. Heroin, cocaine and marijuana have all been banned, and the worldwide attempt to enforce those bans, the so-called war on drugs, has been a spectacular failure. It too began with plenty of well-intended moralising about the evils of the drugs it targeted. But by criminalising the production and distribution of narcotics, the war on drugs has handed criminals a vastly profitable business. Billions of dollars in turnover from that illegal trade have been used to corrupt entire countries, undermine the rule of law, maintain private armies and support gangs of terrorists and criminals across the world.

Against that background it has been sobering to learn that tobacco is now a target for criminal activity. Recent high-profile arrests have exposed extensive international smuggling operations. Our reports have revealed how widespread the sale of cheap, illegal tobacco has become in Australia. Tobacco excise is now so high, and cigarette production so circumscribed, that smuggling is a lucrative – and for criminals relatively safe – alternative to the illegal drug trade. This should be a serious warning to policymakers. It signals clearly, in flashing red letters, that current approaches need to be rethought.



Tobacco excise is now so high, and cigarette production so circumscribed, that smuggling is lucrative. Photo: Jason South

Australia should do nothing which turns tobacco into just another illegal or quasi-illegal drug and so profits only organised crime. Instead we should use tobacco – highly addictive, of no therapeutic value, deadly in its long-term effects, requiring careful management, but still legal – as a proving ground for policies which can be used to manage other drugs which are currently illegal, so that when common sense eventually prevails, they may be decriminalised and their use minimised.

Compulsory plain packaging, which has cut smoking, is an excellent example of how a dangerous recreational drug might be managed. It may also be worth considering whether to medicalise tobacco and nicotine completely. Perhaps nicotine addicts should gain access to their drug only through a doctor's prescription, to be filled by a chemist. Although experience shows other prescription drugs can also become black market goods, the process nonetheless eliminates all glamour – even now one of tobacco's selling points – from its use.

But in contemplating moves like these, our society will have to accept that some people – hopefully many fewer than now – will still smoke. If we base our initiatives solely on empty moralising about the harm tobacco does, and pay no regard to the unintended consequences of bans or near-bans – lucrative criminal black markets – we will never find the right balance.

Source: <http://www.smh.com.au/comment/smh-editorial/we-should-beware-of-ceding-tobacco-to-the-criminals-20171002-gyst9l.html>