



The case against bans, including on cigarettes

I must have been 16 but my memory is as clear as if it happened yesterday. I had come down for the weekend from Stowe and we were watching television. Kiran was smoking. We were in the middle of one of those *Carry On* films when one of the ads caught our attention.

Two British policemen were walking past a roadside café when their eyes lit upon a svelte blonde. She was sipping coffee with a long cigarette in her left hand.

“Look at her”, whispered the first bobby.

“But she’s smoking?”, said the other.

“I like her legs.”

“They’re as long as her wretched cigarette.”

“I’d like to kiss those lips.”

“Like kissing a bloody ashtray!”

By this stage, the two policemen had

walked past and the blonde turned to the screen and smiled. As her lips parted her teeth were revealed. They were brown with nicotine stains.

“Yuck!” I exclaimed involuntarily. A shudder ran down my spine. Kiran stubbed out her unfinished cigarette. I don’t recall her smoking again that weekend.

I don’t know who made the ad, whether it was government-sponsored or funded by a private trust, but it was effective. If our government is keen to curb smoking, then it has to launch a similarly imaginative and memorable campaign. Smokers can possibly be persuaded to give up. Attempts to bludgeon them will only fail. This is why decisions to ban smoking are so horribly wrong. The last British government toyed with the idea. I hope ours

never does.

Arguably, it’s our ability to decide for ourselves, to tell right from wrong, good from bad, moral from immoral, that distinguishes us from other animals. Provided we do not endanger others this right is sacrosanct. It also defines our individuality. Any blanket ban which decides for us denies our essential humanity. It diminishes us. It treats us like children that cannot be trusted to decide properly.

Inseparable from the right to decide is the presumption others may disagree. But for that very reason the right has to be upheld. My individuality lies in my right to be different from you and I expect you to respect the difference even if you don’t like it.

Thus it is with smoking. There are a thousand good reasons not to smoke; a million good arguments to persuade me against it. But if I still choose to do so, don’t seek to ban me. Don’t preclude my choice.

The argument that you do so in my interest is specious and unconvincing. I cannot deny that smoking is bad for my health — no smoker I know would — but so, after all, is overeating, excessive exercising, straining my eyes and drinking too many Cokes. Yet if I like any of these, I — and only I — should be the one to choose whether I can go ahead despite advice to

the contrary. If I suffer for my indulgence, so be it. After all, the right to decide includes the right to suffer for my choice.

So, how should the government behave? The answer is simple and straightforward. Let it seek to influence but not ban. Let it enforce the largest and most stark health warnings on cigarette packets, increase the incidence of taxation — although there’s a point beyond which that will become both unremunerative and counter-productive — and finance the widest campaign against smoking. I would support all three. But never try to ban smoking. Groups or individuals will do that of their own volition when and if they want. The government must not do it for them.

Let me put it succinctly. Good governments seek to make adults of children by giving them the opportunity to decide for themselves and the capacity to accept responsibility for doing so. That’s how a country learns to stand on its feet. Bad governments make children of adults by taking away their power to choose and, instead, enforcing their own decisions on them. That’s how nations start to crumble.

Incidentally, I no longer smoke.

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