



Celebrating 20 years of the Smoke-free Environments Act, and the next steps to end the tobacco epidemic

Twenty years ago, the politics and hysteria about regulating the activities of the tobacco industry in New Zealand reached a peak with the passing of the Smoke-free Environments Act. Much of the frenzy was posed as a show of concern for smokers. John Banks, then a National Party MP, said:

“The government will have an army of leather-vested, jackbooted officials sniffing out tobacco smells around the country...Little tin gods from the Department of Health will be going around the country in hobnail boots”.¹

The tobacco industry organised a lobby group called “*New Zealanders for the Right to Decide*”, fronted by former national soccer coach John Adshead. According to a *North and South* magazine article of March 1990, the group was actually run by a public relations firm, Burston-Marsteller.² This firm had run a similar ploy in Canada, which was paid for by the tobacco industry. An offshoot of their campaign in 1990 was the full page advertising from the “*Sports People for Freedom in Sport*”, another front, run by Andy Haden’s public relations agency.³

The tobacco industry efforts weren’t off-the-cuff. As early as 1981 or before, they were planning to oppose smokefree efforts, running an international campaign “Operation Mayflower”.

The objectives in New Zealand, summarised by Ogilvy & Mather in their report to the Tobacco Institute of New Zealand,^{4(p.29)} were to:

- Maintain smoking as a socially acceptable pastime (freedom to choose).
- Reassure people that it has not been scientifically proven that passive smoking is harmful to non-smokers.
- Position the Tobacco Institute of New Zealand as a responsible body which wants to present the facts about smoking issues.

In the late 1980s the industry organised “Operation Leo”—a plan to counter the Government’s smokefree plans.⁵ Within this plan, there was also “Operation Bo-Beep” to develop the *New Zealanders for the Right to Decide* and to form a smokers’ rights group.⁶

What did the Smoke-free Environments Act do?

The new law stopped print media advertising, restricted shop advertising, phased out sports and event tobacco sponsorship, and created a Health Sponsorship Council to provide smokefree sponsorship. It prohibited smoking in buses, domestic aircraft, lifts, multi-person offices, and the public section of any workplace.

But more importantly, along with the tobacco price rises of 1986–91, the publicity around the Act, and the impetus it gave to quit smoking, saved thousands of lives. Thousands of New Zealanders now have parents and grandparents alive and healthy, who would otherwise be sick or dead from their smoking.⁷

Are the politics different now?

Smokefree indoor public places may now be accepted,⁸ but there are a number of signs that real change in ending the tobacco epidemic will continue to be delayed by politicians. One example is the absence of substantive progress around smokefree cars.

Prime Minister John Key has said a 'National Government' wouldn't be telling people they couldn't smoke in their own cars. His reasoning was that National is a party of 'reasonable choice'. He said that he wasn't 'opposed to banning smoking in bars, because other New Zealanders are there and people work there' and that this issue would 'distract the parliament'.⁹

The implication is that 'other' New Zealanders are not to be found in cars. Two years later, smokefree cars are still not in the proposed new smokefree legislation as outlined in late 2010. Policymakers appear to have little concern about the children who have no 'reasonable choice' when they travel in cars with smokers, compared to their concern for adult 'rights'.¹⁰ This is despite the survey evidence that indicates that over 95% of Kiwi smokers think that smoking should not be allowed in cars with pre-school children.¹¹ It is also in contrast to a growing number of North American and Australian jurisdictions that have banned smoking in cars with children.¹²

What needs to be done

The Maori Affairs Select Committee (MASC) Inquiry report in November provided much of the template for the future reduction of the tobacco epidemic in this country.¹³ It provides a goal (making New Zealand smokefree by 2025), a comprehensive programme of measures, it recommends that an updated tobacco control strategy be developed, and it addresses the issue of the structure of tobacco control management. It clearly targets the tobacco industry.

Many of the MASC recommendations would be practical to insert into the new Smoke-free Amendment Bill.¹³ Health workers and concerned citizens can all make submissions to the Health Select Committee suggesting these insertions. But prompt action is needed since submissions close on 28 January 2011 – in only one week.

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