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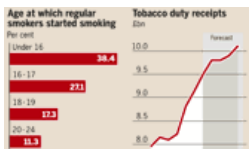
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Big Tobacco campaigns on freedom

By Christopher Thompson

The footage resembles a music video for an anarchist punk-rock band. Policemen, warning signs, CCTV cameras and spiked fences appear in a rapid sequence of black and white shots. A thrashing guitar soundtrack begins – cue the message: “Welcome to Nanny Town”.

In fact, the YouTube video is the latest tool in the armoury of the tobacco industry, which is facing an onslaught of curbs in the UK including Friday’s introduction of a ban on tobacco displays in large shops.



Andrew Lansley, the health secretary, said the measure was introduced so that people “literally no longer see smoking as a normal part of life”. Before the government’s next consultation into plain packaging, in which cigarettes are sold in identical drab packaging without logos, [British American Tobacco](#), [Imperial Tobacco](#) and [Japan Tobacco International](#) are helping to fund an unconventional libertarian campaign.

“There is a feeling among the general public that the theft of trademarks is a step too far in terms of tobacco regulation,” said Michael Prideaux, BAT’s communications director. “Who will be next? I think the libertarian argument resonates among people who wouldn’t normally take notice of what the tobacco industry say.”

Where past anti-regulation efforts focused on the detrimental effects to businesses, such as corner shops, tobacco companies and their supporters are now targeting the broader theme of personal freedom to stave off the world’s toughest anti-tobacco laws.

“Plain packaging is the persecution of minority lifestyle choice,” said Simon Clark, director of the Freedom Organisation for the Right to Enjoy Smoking Tobacco, or Forest, which will receive £330,000 in corporate tobacco funding for 2012 and is spearheading a campaign called Hands Off Our Packs (Hoops). “It feels as if we are part of a growing libertarian movement – this is something quite new and, from our point of view, very encouraging.”

So far Australia is the only country to pass plain packaging laws, which are due to be implemented in December. The world’s four biggest tobacco companies outside China – Philip Morris, BAT, Imperial and JTI – have launched lawsuits against the Australian government, accusing it of confiscating their brands. Earlier this month they were joined by Ukraine who accused Australia at the World Trade Organisation of violating international law regarding intellectual property.

In the UK, the **Hoops campaign** has enlisted the support of prominent think-tanks.

“There are a chorus of voices [saying] that government intervention is going too far and tobacco, the most regulated consumer product, is at the coal face,” said Mark Littlewood, director of the centre-right Institute of Economic Affairs. “Plain packaging is the start of a slippery slope to the government becoming ‘big mother’ to every adult.”

In February the free-market Adam Smith Institute, which received about £9,000 in funding from tobacco companies last year, published a report on plain packaging in which it criticised “anti-smoking extremism and the risks of hyper-regulation”.

The message is supported by libertarian groups such as Freedom Association, Progressive Vision and Liberal Vision, the Liberal Democrat blog, none of which receive tobacco funding.

Nonetheless, the campaign has drawn a sharp response from tobacco control groups. According to Action on Smoking and Health, the tobacco industry is “increasingly resorting to the use of front groups and third party advocates” to influence policy outcomes.

“I think they’re trying to enlist supporters to lobby government,” said Deborah Arnott, chief executive of Ash. “Because they can’t get through the door to Number 10 they’re trying to persuade others to do so for them.”

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Tobacco supporters point out that some of the pro-packaging groups receive government money. Ash received a £150,000 grant last year from the Department of Health although **Ash said** this was not to lobby for tobacco control. Regional organisations who support plain packaging such as Smokefree Southwest, Fresh North East and Tobacco Free Futures receive funding from local NHS bodies.

Meanwhile the libertarians hope to expand their nanny state argument beyond smokers to alcohol and fatty foods. Their message? Come for smokers, and booze and burgers are next.

“Part of our campaign is to emphasise that this debate goes far beyond tobacco,” said Mr Clark. “In our view it’s only a matter of time before alcohol and fast-food are targeted in exactly the same way.”

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