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# Seeing through the smoking ban

By Mick Hume

**Spiked-online column that describes mass surrender to the health police – or maybe just to middle class aesthetic prejudice – but falls far short of a suitable pitch of outrage. The discontinued Bio-Power Digest calls on non-smokers everywhere to wear symbols of a Pledge to take the Filthy Habit up from July 1.**

## Seeing through the smoking ban

All those countless No Smoking signs make a fitting epitaph to the Blair years in British politics, and a signpost to the future.

Mick Hume

The fug of war clears, the long battle of the smoking bans is over, resistance is down to its last fag-end. Smoking will disappear from public places in England on 1 July (following bans across the rest of Britain), and it ain't ever coming back. End of, get over it, etc. But before we all give it up and move on, it is worth reflecting on what the institutionalised smoking bans say about the society we live in today.

The ban on smoking in public finally comes in just days after Tony Blair moves out of Downing Street. All those countless thousands of No Smoking signs will make a fitting epitaph to the Blair years in British politics – and also serve as a signpost to what we can expect under Gordon Brown (or even David Cameron).

The smoking ban means New Labour is enforcing restrictions on people's habits that no previous government would seriously have countenanced. It confirms that politics has become more about policing personal behaviour than building the Good Society. And by the same token, the response shows the new willingness of the public – including many smokers – to accept restrictions that would have seemed unimaginable only a few years ago. That trend confirms both how many are now open to intervention by the therapeutic state, and willing to see other people as the problem.

The ban is a typical New Labour measure – petty, and yet far-reaching. The party's ambitions have shrivelled from creating a socialist Britain to making bus-stops smoke-free. Yet at the same time it marks a big step into the territory of imposing conformism on the population. That is also reflected in the advance of a new language of political orthodoxy; as I have argued elsewhere today, the un-hyphenated word 'Smokefree', which the authorities have invented to describe the ban and its effect, would have fitted perfectly into George Orwell's detailed definition of Newspeak (see Am I guilty of oldthink or is this sensefree by Mick Hume).

Like other New Labour measures it is an unnecessary law, less a practical measure to address a real problem than a politico-moral intervention designed to shape wider public opinion in the way that old-fashioned Politics no longer can. It might hardly seem to matter now but, while smoking is undoubtedly bad for you, it is true that there is no decent evidence linking passive smoking to serious health problems. The health zealots took up the passive smoking issue as a stick with which to beat smokers who refused to be swayed by their warnings and lectures. The government went along with their smoke-and-mirrors arguments in order to make a connection with a health professional constituency, and influence a wider audience.

In this sense the smoking ban is a study of the operation not, as is often said, of the nanny state, but of the new therapy state, which sees its task as helping and guiding an ignorant 'unaware' public along the path to righteousness.

Yet for all that this is classic New Labour, the government was for a long time none too keen on imposing a total ban. Blair's people worried that it would be a step too far and provoke a backlash. They tried to cook up various messy compromise measures. However, when the moral crusaders of the backbenches and the public health professions forced their hand, New Labour found that there was no significant opposition. The backlash stopped before it had really begun.

People seem accepting, even enthusiastic, about being told that smoking is banned in a way that would have been deemed unacceptable just a decade ago. True, the numbers of smokers have declined. But even many of those who still smoke now seem resigned to the ban as a 'good thing'. Where once people might have insisted on their right to sort out smoking issues among themselves, now many will invite in the health police.

This compliant response to the smoking ban provides the other side of the story. Partly it reflects the obsession with personal health as the point of existence rather than as a means to a fuller, more enjoyable life. The ceaseless barrage of everyday health scares and messages about 'health awareness' have helped to create a widespread self-image of vulnerability. Even those who do not change their behaviour as instructed, by stopping smoking or drinking, are often more guiltily 'conscious' of their sins and aware that Something should be Done.

The authorities have encouraged this attitude at every turn. Yet this is not a case of the public being 'duped' by New Labour. It is a symptom of a wider problem in our contemporary society of vulnerable, mistrustful individuals where many of the traditional connections between people and communities have broken down and not been replaced.

The passive smoking issue has become a symbol of this disconnected state of affairs, a sort of metaphor for a mindset that always sees somebody else and their behaviour as the problem in your life. It is not just other people's smoke that is now seen as toxic - it is other people themselves. And perhaps we can no longer even trust ourselves not to harm us without the professional help of the therapeutic state.

It is because of this vulnerable state of mind that the smoking ban has been so readily accepted without serious questions being raised about the way that the state is colonising public space. It also helps to explain why the creeping petty authoritarianism has gone unchallenged as it impinges on the private sphere, where people are now being told they should not expect to receive council services or to adopt children if they still smoke in their own homes.

We are left at the end of the Blair years with a society where signs tell us kiddies at every turn not to smoke, where we are encouraged to ring shop-a-smoker hotlines to bring the anti-smoking cops running, and where outcasts 'come together' by huddling in some filthy corner for a smoke - or maybe going for counselling. And most depressing of all, all this is depicted as some sort of 'victory' for the left. The civil liberties lawyers who are permanently up in arms about New Labour's anti-terror laws or ASBOs have nothing to say about smoking bans.

As they used to say of great men, 'Si monumentum requiris, circumspice' - if you seek his monument, look around (while remembering that a Brown or a Cameron government would have done the same). We may be able to see it more clearly in some public places after the smoking ban. But some of us do not much like all that we see.

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