

The tobacco industry and me

This posting has been paid for by the tobacco industry. It is an article commissioned by Risk of Freedom Briefing, a publication edited by the philosopher Roger Scruton and sponsored by JT International (Japan Tobacco). Sadly, before it could be published, JT International withdrew their sponsorship and the publication ceased business. So it is published here for the first time. But although it wasn't published I was paid for the article so I confess to have taken the industry's shilling – or in this case £100.

Does he who pays the piper call the tune?

I have been offered £100 for this article. Should I take it? The money would come in handy – but from the TOBACCO INDUSTRY?!

This is a question with which I had already been wrestling when I received my invitation to contribute an article to *Risk of Freedom Briefing*. I had had an inquiry from British American Tobacco about whether I might be interested in commenting on the controversy about snus.

For those who don't know it, snus is a tiny teabag full of tobacco that you place between gum and lip. Its effect is comparable to that of a strong nicotine patch. It can be sold legally in the EU only in Sweden, which has more snus users than smokers. The Swedish exemption from the EU ban was prompted by the fear that Sweden would not vote to join the EU if its citizens were to be forbidden snus.

Snus has received a qualified endorsement in an article in *Tobacco Control*¹, a peer reviewed journal published by the BMJ Group. The available evidence indicates that it does not cause lung cancer or mouth cancer and, unlike (legal) chewing tobacco does not involve spitting. If it is a gateway drug, it is a gateway out of smoking rather than into smoking. The authors of the article had impeccable anti-smoking credentials. They included Clive Bates, formerly head of ASH (Britain's leading anti-smoking pressure group), and researchers at Cancer Research UK and St George's Hospital Medical School.

So why should smoking tobacco be legal throughout the EU and snus banned, except for Sweden? Not logical I thought. I was tempted to say so on behalf of British American Tobacco who had spotted a market opportunity if the sale of snus were to be permitted throughout the EU.

But I hesitated. I consulted my informal ethics committee. They unanimously advised that I should not take money from BAT. Why? If it were known that I had taken money from the devil henceforth whatever I might say or publish on anything relating to risk might be dismissible, by those who disagreed with me, as bribed evidence.

So I thought of a plan. I might write something about the illogicality of making snus illegal while permitting the legal sale of something much more harmful. But I would not take BAT's money. Instead I would find a charity to which they would pay my

¹ European Union Policy on smokeless tobacco: a statement in favour of evidence based regulation for public health, *Tobacco Control*, 2003; 12; 360-367.
<http://tobaccocontrol.bmj.com/cgi/content/full/12/4/360?maxtoshow=&HITS=10&hits=10&RESULTFORMAT=&author1=bates&fulltext=snus&andorexactfulltext=and&searchid=1&FIRSTINDEX=0&sortspec=relevance&volume=12&firstpage=360&resourcetype=HWCIT>

extortionate fee - extortionate because the industry has lots of money and most advertising outlets are now barred to them.

So I thought of Liberty. I am an admirer of its director Shami Chakrabarti who is wonderfully articulate in defence of the freedom to speak one's mind. Would Liberty be willing to take a donation from BAT?

I phoned them to inquire. I found myself talking to an incredibly stupid woman. I was incapable of making my proposal understood. She got cross. Why on earth should I want to arrange for the tobacco industry to make a charitable contribution to Liberty? I got testy. Finally, after about five querulous minutes, she said in exasperated tones "You do realize you are talking to Liberty Department Store?" Not as stupid as me!

I tried again. When I got through to the real Liberty they considered my conditional offer (conditional because I had not yet put my proposal to BAT) and decided against taking money from the tobacco industry - for the same reason that made me nervous.

Scientific arguments can be bitter, but when scientific issues become the focus of campaigns aimed at changing behaviour, debates can acquire the vicious ad hominem characteristics common to much political argument. Some years ago I advanced the idea that "risk compensation" altered the behaviour of drivers wearing seat belts in a way that was likely to put other road users at greater risk. I was denounced as a loony libertarian with blood on my hands for undermining public confidence in this wonderfully effective safety device². And when there are significant sums of money at stake, as in the global warming debate, the reciprocal imputing of base or evil motives to those on the other side of the issue acquires a pecuniary dimension, and added venom.

So what should I do? Is £100 of tobacco industry money laundered through the philosophical hands of Roger Scruton likely to warp my judgement? Or allow others to claim that it has? I think I'll take the risk.

Yes please, may I have the money?

² The argument rumbles on. See Britain's seat belt law should be repealed (<http://john-adams.co.uk/2006/12/16/britains-seat-belt-law-should-be-repealed/>) and Seat belt legislation and the Isles Report (<http://john-adams.co.uk/2007/01/04/seat-belt-legislation-and-the-isles-report/>)