

## Prohibition returns [1]

Type: [Think Pieces](#)<sup>[2]</sup> Written by **Chris Snowdon** | Wednesday 29 August 2012



Contrary to [some excitable headlines](#) <sup>[3]</sup>, Tasmania has not banned the sale of cigarettes to anyone born in the 21st century. Such a move has been proposed, but it is [most unlikely](#) <sup>[4]</sup> that the Australian state's Lower House will allow it to become law. Nevertheless, it is another sign that anti-smoking campaigners are ready to come out of the closet and admit that they are prohibitionists. For decades, any suggestion that advocates for a "smoke-free world" secretly wanted to criminalise the sale of tobacco were met with denial and protestation. This was not a witch-hunt against smokers, they said, only a campaign for better education, or restricting advertising, or protecting bar-staff, or saving the children.

The Tasmanian ruse, which was first mooted in Singapore, retains a "think-of-the-children" element by forbidding those born after the year 2000 from purchasing tobacco products. Since the eldest of these people are currently twelve years old, this is not immediately controversial, but in a few years time it will mean prohibition for the first wave of adult consumers. This crucial fact seemed to escape some Tasmanians, like the gentleman who [told ABC News](#) <sup>[5]</sup> that the proposal "definitely has my support mate because I believe that children shouldn't be smoking." This sentiment is, of course, besides the point. The real question is whether future generations should be treated like children forevermore; the Peter Pans of tobacco control.

This is not the first time tobacco prohibition has raised its head this year. The advocacy journal *Tobacco Control* kicked things off with a special edition featuring several articles about what it calls the "endgame?". In February, the historian Robert Proctor published the first overtly prohibitionist book of the new era, the title of which—"Golden Holocaust: Origins of the Cigarette Catastrophe and the Case for Abolition"—requires little explanation. More recently, an academic named Craig Dalton has set up a [website](#) <sup>[6]</sup> to campaign for a "ban on retail tobacco." In a clever rhetorical twist, Dalton portrays a total ban on the sale of tobacco as less mean-spirited than the current approach:

*"When will we finally reach the logical conclusion that [banning tobacco is much more compassionate](#)<sup>[7]</sup> than squeezing smokers with more and more painful stigmatisation?"*

This is a text-book example of a false dichotomy. Option B is better than Option A therefore we must do B, never mind that C, D, E, F etc. have been unexplored. Never mind either that options A and B are both the creations of the same group of extremists. Dalton seems to acknowledge that the doctrine of "denormalisation" lacks humanity, but only in order to move towards a still more draconian phase.

A detailed game-plan for the "logical conclusion" of the anti-smoking endeavour appeared in *Tobacco*

Control as a faux-retrospective article titled 'How smoking became history: looking back to 2012' in which Richard Daynard [imagines living in 2032 when smoked tobacco is banned worldwide](#) [8]. In this fantasy, New Zealand outlaws sales in 2020, a prohibition which 'went so smoothly that many countries followed suit'. Twelve years later, the work of tobacco controllers is limited to campaigning against smokeless tobacco and 'stamping out cigarette smuggling where it still arises'.

How simple it all sounds, with that brief reference to smuggling being the only acknowledgement of the serious unintended consequences associated with alcohol suppression and the War on Drugs. And yet, even at this late hour, the word 'prohibition' remains verboten. Proctor talks only of the 'abolition' of the cigarette industry, Tobacco Control uses the euphemism of an 'endgame' and Dalton is eager to distinguish his ban on 'retail sales' from America's 'Noble Experiment' of the 1920s:

*'A comparison to the days of alcohol prohibition are not entirely relevant as this is not a ban on the substance desired by smokers - nicotine, which will still be available - but a ban on its most deadly form of delivery: retail tobacco sales.'*

This is little more than sophistry. If smokers found pharmaceutical nicotine products to be suitable replacements for cigarettes, we would not be having this discussion. As for his contention that 'we cannot assume that a black market will flourish with a retail ban', copious historical evidence exists to the contrary, not only for drink, drugs and tobacco but for all sorts of products.

Proctor's insistence on talking about 'abolition' rather than 'prohibition' presumably reflects the positive connotations of the former (being primarily associated with the end of slavery) and a desire to distance himself from the toxic legacy of Al Capone et al. Under his scheme, cigarettes would not be sold or manufactured commercially but people would be free to grow their own tobacco. As a historian, he must know that this differs in no way from the Volstead Act, which effectively abolished the drinks industry, but did not forbid the consumption or domestic production of alcohol. Proctor's 'abolition' is prohibition in both intention and detail.

Advocates of the so-called 'endgame' also espouse 'ending commercial sales but allowing tobacco growing for personal use', but they are still more optimistic about the post-abolition world. In an article entitled 'What are the elements of the tobacco endgame?', they suggest that there is a [real possibility of reducing the smoking rate to just 0.5% of the population](#) [9]. To put this in context, after a century-long War on Drugs, 0.5% of the British population have used heroin in the past year. By contrast, smoking prevalence in the UK is 20% and there are 1.2 billion smokers in the world—a number that rises every day. Undaunted by these figures, the authors retreat into their dream world and worry that 'some might argue that even this [0.5% smoking rate] is insufficient, as this prevalence would still kill many.'

It is doubtful that even a smoking rate of 0.01% would satisfy them. For the moral entrepreneur, the only tolerable rate of consumption is zero and surely nobody imagined that the stated goal of a 'tobacco-free world' could be achieved by persuasion alone. The lurch towards prohibition should therefore not be surprising. And yet their squeamishness about using the P word, and the scramble to find a more friendly-sounding term, would not be necessary if these advocates believed that prohibition was a noble goal. They know they are naughty boys and girls, these crusaders, and they hope the public will be fooled if they coin new terms for their discredited ideology of suppression.

There will be a certain historical neatness if this decade sees a gathering storm of prohibitionist fervour followed by a struggle to undo the damage in the next, as it will mirror the second and third decades of the last century when America's idealism got the better of it. If New Zealand does indeed ban tobacco in 2020 it will coincide with the centenary of the 18th Amendment, which came into force in January 1920, and will

be a fitting tribute to humanity's endless failure to learn the lessons of history.

We can, of course, have a debate about how the prohibition of cigarettes might differ from the prohibition of drink or the 'abolition' of marijuana. We can, if we must, listen to those who promise that the laws of supply and demand, and human nature, have changed in the 100 years since the 'retail sale' of whisky and cocaine was banned. But what we must not do is pretend that the 'endgame' of tobacco control is anything other than prohibition, nor that those who support it are anything other than prohibitionists.

---

**Source URL:** <http://www.adamsmith.org/research/articles/prohibition-returns>

**Links:**

[1] <http://www.adamsmith.org/research/articles/prohibition-returns>

[2] <http://www.adamsmith.org/research-type/think-pieces>

[3] <http://www.metro.co.uk/news/909823-cigarettes-to-be-banned-for-everyone-born-after-2000-in-tasmania>

[4] <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2012-08-23/tas-smoking-ban-facing-lower-house-hurdle/4217022?section=tas>

[5] <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2012-08-23/tas-smoking-ban-facing-lower-house-hurdle/4217022>

[6] <http://www.tobacco-ban-australia.org/>

[7] <http://theconversation.edu.au/should-we-set-a-date-for-a-tobacco-free-australia-8056>

[8] <http://tobaccocontrol.bmj.com/content/21/2/289.full>

[9] <http://tobaccocontrol.bmj.com/content/21/2/293>