

Health Groups to Cameron and Hunt: Let Parliament Decide on Standardised Packaging

08 May 2013

Following Jeremy Hunt's appearance on Radio 4's Today programme saying that a decision had not been taken on standardised packaging, members of the Smokefree Action Coalition [1] have written to Prime Minister David Cameron and Secretary of State Jeremy Hunt today expressing deep disappointment that legislation to introduce standardised packaging of tobacco products was not included in the Queen's Speech. They believe that the failure to bring forward legislation fatally undermines the Government's credibility on public health issues. [2]

Smoking remains the major cause of preventable death and disease, killing 100,000 people each year in the UK [3] with over 200,000 children taking up smoking each year [4]. It is an addiction primarily of children and young people with two thirds of smokers becoming addicted before the age of 18 [5].

The Public Health Minister, Anna Soubry MP, has publicly stated that she is 'personally persuaded' by the evidence of the need for standardised packaging. She went on to say that it was now time for the debate to be had with colleagues in Parliament. [6] The Smokefree Action Coalition agrees with the Public Health Minister.

Since the launch of the public consultation on standard tobacco packaging in April 2012, there has been a groundswell of support for the measure with nearly two-thirds of the public and a majority of MPs across all political parties in favour. [7]

In their joint letters to the Prime Minister and Secretary of State for Health, members of the SFAC, including the Association of Directors of Public Health, the Faculty of Public Health, the Royal College of Physicians, the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, the British Medical Association and the Trading Standards Institute, say that if the Government will not go ahead with the introduction of standardised packaging then Parliament should be allowed to decide on the issue in a free vote in this parliamentary session. In order to facilitate the debate the Coalition also wants the Government to publish the outcome of the consultation on this issue, a consultation which finished nearly 9 months ago, on 10th August 2012 [8].

The President of the Royal College of Physicians, Sir Richard Thompson said:

"This is a major lost opportunity to help protect children from starting to smoke. Evidence shows that plain packaging is less attractive to young people. In the UK, two thirds of regular smokers started smoking before the age of 18; two fifths before the age of 16. Only around half will manage to stop smoking during their lifetime. We need to take every opportunity to reduce the amount of deaths and disease in later life by preventing children from starting to smoke now."

Dr Janet Atherton, President of the Association of Directors of Public Health said:

"Smoking is an addiction of childhood, with two thirds of smokers starting before the age of 18. Tobacco packaging is clearly targeted at young people, and standardised packs would provide one less reason for them to start smoking. There has been an extensive public consultation on this issue – this should not be buried – the public has a right to expect that it should be properly debated in Parliament."

Leon Livermore, Chief Executive of the Trading Standards Institute said:

"The harm to public health from tobacco use is so great that every possible means of reducing this harm should be considered. Smoking remains one of the most significant challenges to public health. This laudable move towards plain packaging must not be derailed. The UK is the standard bearer for tobacco control in Europe and where we lead others will follow. This gives us added responsibility to proceed with plain packaging sooner rather than later."

Deborah Arnott, Chief Executive of health charity ASH said:

"Every day nearly 570 young people start smoking, and many will go on to die early from smoking-related disease. Smoking is by far the biggest cause of preventable premature death, and the poorest communities suffer worst. It is clear that a majority of MPs and peers as well as the general public support standard packs. If the Government cannot find the courage to act, then Parliament must be given the chance to decide, as it did with smokefree legislation."

Notes and links

[1] The Smokefree Action Coalition is an alliance of over 100 health organisations.

The following are signatories to the letter to the Prime Minister :

Dr Clare Gerada, Chair of Council, Royal College of General Practitioners,
Dr Janet Atherton, President, Association of Directors of Public Health
Harpal Kumar, Chief Executive, Cancer Research UK Professor
Lindsey Davies, President, Faculty of Public Health
Dr Peter Carter, Chief Executive and General Secretary, Royal College of Nursing
Dr Mark Porter, Chair of Council, British Medical Association
Graham Jukes, Chief Executive, Chartered Institute of Environmental Health
Penny Woods, Chief Executive, British Lung Foundation
Simon Gillespie, Chief Executive, British Heart Foundation
Francine Bates, Chief Executive, The Lullaby Trust
Sir Richard Thompson, President, Royal College of Physicians
Dr Hilary Cass, President, Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health
Leon Livermore, Chief Executive, trading Standards Institute
Deborah Arnott, Chief Executive, ASH

- [letter to the Prime Minister, 08 May 2013](#)

- [letter to the Deputy Prime Minister, 08 May 2013](#)

- [letter to the Health Secretary, 08 May 2013](#)

[\[2\] Today Programme, BBC Radio 4, 08 May 2013.](#)

Jeremy Hunt: We haven't made a decision actually John and ...

JH: Well (indistinct) lost it ...

Jeremy Hunt: ... when I have made a decision, when I have made a decision, as you know extremely well and you've been in this game for much longer than I have, just because something isn't in the Queen's Speech doesn't mean the Government can't bring it forward as law. But we haven't made a decision and when we have ...

JH: Why?

Jeremy Hunt: ... made, well when, which, which of those two issues are you talking about?

JH: Either, both ...

Jeremy Hunt: Okay ...

JH: ... because both of them you, you want to do don't you, you want a minimum price, as the Health Secretary you want a minimum price for alcohol and you would like to see plain packets, certainly your Public Health Minister Anna Soubry does?

Jeremy Hunt: I heard the interview but let me just explain on, on minimum unit pricing there was a court case because they are trying to do this in Scotland and that was only resolved this week and so it wasn't possible for us to actually consider what course of action to do until that was clear. On plain paper packaging if we do it we would be the first country in the Europe, the second country in the world, Australia only introduced it in January so it's a much harder job to assess the evidence as to how effective it would be and that takes time and I want to make sure we do the job properly. So I'm going to take the time that I need to.

JH: But you can see it looks a wee bit as if you're scared of it now and, and there could be if that is true, if my supposition is true, then it could be that you're actually you're rather scared of UKIP because they would be very cross about it wouldn't they given, given what we know about Mr Farage and his liking for cigarettes and a pint?

Jeremy Hunt: Well you keep putting this word scared assuming that I've decided, we haven't made our decision and when we have made our decision we shall see if

"Just because something is not in the Queen's Speech doesn't mean the government cannot bring it forward as law," Mr Hunt added. (source: [BBC News](#))

[3] ASH factsheet. [Smoking statistics: Illness and Death](#). April 2013. (pdf)

[4] [Statistical analysis by Cancer Research UK](#) based on 2011 data from Smoking, drinking and drug use among young people.

[5] Two thirds of smokers become addicted before the age of 18 and 39% under 16 see data from the [General Lifestyle Survey](#)

[6] Today Programme. BBC Radio 4, 19 April 2013

Anna Soubry: There is work to be done on smoking and that's the next debate that we've got to have. We've had a consultation on what's called plain, it's not, it's very colourful very intricate, but standardised packaging, and there's a real debate now to be had on whether or not we should introduce it like they have in Australia.

John Humphrys: Are you in favour of that?

AS: I am

JH: So it's going to happen

AS: Oh no, it doesn't mean to say it's going to happen because we haven't had the debate. We need now to have that debate. I've seen the evidence. I've seen the consultation. I've been personally persuaded of it, but that doesn't mean to say that all my colleagues in government on both sides of the house are persuaded, and that's the debate that we now have to have

[7] A poll by YouGov for ASH found that overall 64% of adults in Great Britain were in favour of standard packaging. Total sample size was 12171 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 1st and 19th February 2013. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB adults (aged 18+). A separate YouGov poll conducted on the 10th and 11th March 2013 revealed the views of the public by which party they support. Support by voting intention was 62% of those intending to vote Conservative, 63% of Labour and 60% of Liberal Democrats. There was majority support across all ages, genders and social classes. This was a representative sample of 1684 adults. Respondents were shown what a standard pack could look like, including larger health warnings as in Australia and envisaged under the revised EU Tobacco Products Directive. All members of the SFAC (over 100 organisations) support standardised tobacco packaging.

[8] [DH consultation on standardised packaging](#) started on 16th April 2012 and finished on 10th August 2012. Standardised packaging was defined for the purposes of the consultation as:

- All internal and external packaging to be in a prescribed colour/s.
- All text on the pack, including brand names, to be in a standard colour and typeface.
- No branding, advertising or promotion to be permitted on the outside or inside of packs, or attached to the package, or on individual tobacco products themselves. For this purpose 'branding' includes logos, colours or other features associated with a tobacco brand.
- Any foils within a pack to be of a standard format and colour with no text permitted.
- Packs to be of a standard shape and opening
- Packs would still carry health warnings, fiscal marks and other markings to help identify fraud.