

Briefing on the tobacco industry and their tactics

Briefing

February 2025

Smoking is the leading cause of premature death and disability in the UK, responsible for **half the difference** in healthy life expectancy between the most and least deprived. **Two out of three** people who try one cigarette become daily smokers, and **three-quarters of smokers** would never have started if they had the choice again.

Article 5.3 of the **WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC)** – an international health treaty signed by the UK – requires signatories to protect health policy from the vested interests of the tobacco industry. We urge you to make your staff aware of Article 5.3 and read the DHSC **[guidance on government engagement with the tobacco industry which should also guide you and your team in deciding what contact to have with the industry](#)**

Tobacco continues to be *hugely* profitable despite falling smoking rates, far more so than other consumer products. The ‘big four’ global tobacco manufacturers have monopoly-like pricing power and little competition, all the while selling products which are highly addictive and kill **two in three** long-term users.

The Tobacco and Vapes Bill returning to Parliament is the first step towards a smokefree future, creating a smokefree generation and taking vital powers to curb youth vaping. As the Bill progresses through Parliament it is likely that the tobacco industry will attempt to water down, disrupt or delay the Bill to buy more time in the UK market. Industry will always protect their profits - despite many company taglines portraying them as part of the ‘solution’.

This briefing provides a guide to the tactics and arguments we expect industry to use around this bill, along with the public health responses.¹

Industry tactics:

Using front groups, proxies, lobby groups and pro-tobacco think tanks

The tobacco industry often works through proxy organisations who will represent industry interests. These organisations are frequently funded by the tobacco industry but will rarely declare this. Tobacco Tactics, an initiative run by the University of Bath, have compiled a list of **front groups**, **lobby groups** and **think tanks** that are associated with

¹ These tactics are not unique to tobacco companies. If you are interested in tactics used by other health-harming industries please read our joint report with the OHA and AHA: **[Killer Tactics](#)**.

the tobacco industry, including the Adam Smith Institute and the [Institute of Economic Affairs](#).

The tobacco industry capitalises on other stakeholders' [concerns with legislation](#) and provides platforms for them to oppose tobacco control measures. For example, at Conservative Party Conference in 2024 Philip Morris (PMI) sponsored a [panel event](#) attended by the Chief Executive of UK Hospitality who criticised proposals to extend smokefree laws to outdoor hospitality settings.

Funding pro-tobacco media coverage

As well as using proxies, the tobacco industry funds roundtables and media work to shape the narrative around tobacco policy. This gives legitimacy to false claims made by the industry. For example, in Autumn 2024 PMI published an article in [Conservative Home](#) and sponsored a roundtable with the Spectator. The Economist has also been [criticised](#) for running articles sponsored by industry.

Spotlight on Forest (The Freedom Organisation for the Right to Enjoy Smoking Tobacco)

[Forest](#) is a 'smokers rights' group that regularly opposes tobacco policy and is often quoted in the media. Although they claim to speak for smokers they rely heavily on funding from tobacco companies. According to their [website](#), most of Forest's funding is donated by tobacco companies, [specifically JTI and Imperial Brands](#).

Forest has opposed nearly all tobacco control measures, including the 2007 smoking ban, plain packaging, and tobacco tax increases, despite strong public support for these policies. While presenting itself as independent, it closely aligns with tobacco industry interests, working to weaken regulation and shift debate away from industry accountability.

Litigation, or the threat of it, against Government

The tobacco industry has a long history of taking legal action against the government. Most recently, tobacco manufacturer Imperial Brands submitted a letter to the then Secretary of State for Health and Social Care [threatening legal action](#) against the Government claiming the consultation process that preceded the Tobacco and Vapes Bill was unlawful. British American Tobacco, Japan Tobacco International and Philip Morris International (whose corporate slogan is 'Delivering a smoke-free future') were all listed as interested parties. Government lawyers [responded](#) saying the proposed challenge was a baseless attempt to delay the Bill being introduced. When standard packaging was introduced the tobacco companies took the UK Government to court and comprehensively lost with an eviscerating judgement against them. [Read more about the history of tobacco industry legal action in the UK.](#)

Saying one thing while doing another

Despite claiming to support a smokefree future, companies like PMI and BAT continue to rely on tobacco for most of their global profits and actively seek to increase the size of their tobacco business. As well as opposing legislation in the UK, both PMI and BAT have [released](#) dozens of new flavoured cigarette brands (known to be appealing to children) in Latin America in recent years. Industry efforts to market cigarettes are increasingly concentrated in lower-income countries which are vulnerable to industry lobbying efforts.

Presenting themselves as partners

Tobacco companies routinely present themselves as partners in a cynical attempt to rehabilitate their brand and influence national and local policymakers. Industry spokespeople cite the need to **involve manufacturers** in the policymaking process and seek to form **partnerships** with local councils and NHS trusts. PMI used the NHS's 70th anniversary to stage a "**disgraceful PR stunt**" by offering NHS staff support to quit smoking. The public see through these efforts and overwhelmingly support ensuring that public health policy is protected from the influence of the tobacco industry, with **78% in favour and just 2% opposed**.

Common arguments used by the tobacco industry:

The tobacco industry relies on a handful of narratives to counter proposed tobacco control legislation or weaken regulations around their other products. Be mindful of individuals or organisations raising the following topics:

Claim	Fact ²
"Tobacco control regulations will result in a burgeoning black market."	<p>There are almost no tobacco control regulations in the last 20 years the industry has not argued will increase the black market. However, despite successive tobacco control policies the illicit market has halved since 2000, with the illicit market share for cigarettes falling from 20% to 7%, and 60% to 33% for hand-rolled tobacco. This is thanks to an effective enforcement strategy.</p> <p>Raising the age of sale will have a gradual impact over time, so is unlikely to significantly impact the black market. When the tobacco age of sale increased from 16 to 18 in 2007 it had no impact on black market sales. The most effective way to reduce demand for illicit tobacco is to support more people to quit smoking.</p>
"Regulations should be relaxed for heated tobacco products (also called heat not burn)"	<p>Heated tobacco products are likely to be less harmful than smoking but more harmful than vaping. Any loopholes in the law which does not comprehensively include all tobacco products risks undermining the effectiveness of legislation, hence all tobacco products should be included.</p> <p>Vaping products also require further regulation but continue to be an important lower risk tool for supporting quitting and will be required as a legal alternative for those who still initiate smoking even when the age of sale has increased</p>
"The impact of a smokefree generation on small retailers will be too great and lead to assaults on staff."	<p>Research independent of the tobacco industry commissioned by ASH finds that most retailers (51%) support the government proposals, with only 26% opposed. A majority of small</p>

² For more responses to industry claims see ASH's [Frequently Asked Questions](#) page.

	<p>businesses reported that previous regulations (the display ban and standardised packaging) had no impact on their business.</p> <p>Selling tobacco is highly profitable for manufacturers, but not for retailers. Retailers make lower profit margins on tobacco than for selling other products (8.5% for tobacco compared to 21% for other products) while tobacco manufacturers make on average 50%.</p>
<p>“The generational smoking ban will be unenforceable”</p>	<p>Increases in the age of sale have been implemented in the UK and around the world with few problems. This did not cause major enforcement issues and led to declines in smoking in the age-groups affected.</p> <p>Adults impacted by this measure will never have been able to purchase tobacco legally and as a result, will be much less likely to be long-term smokers.</p>
<p>“There will be a negative impact on the country’s coffers following a reduction in tobacco tax receipts”</p>	<p>Tobacco costs the UK economy far more than is raised through tobacco taxes (£19.6bn vs £8bn). Reducing smoking rates will directly benefit the public purse and save tens of thousands of lives.</p>
<p>“Smoking is a ‘right’ and prohibiting the sale of tobacco is ‘immoral’ or an infringement on liberty.”</p>	<p>There is no freedom in addiction. Most smokers want to quit but can’t and it takes an average of 30 attempts to stay smoke free. Often the choice to start is made at a young age, locking smokers in for a lifetime of early disability and death.</p>
<p>“Tobacco control regulations will result in a burgeoning black market.”</p>	<p>There are almost no tobacco control regulations in the last 20 years the industry has not argued will increase the black market. However, despite successive tobacco control policies the illicit market has halved since 2000, with the illicit market share for cigarettes falling from 20% to 7%, and 60% to 33% for hand-rolled tobacco. This is thanks to an effective enforcement strategy.</p> <p>Raising the age of sale will have a gradual impact over time, so is unlikely to significantly impact the black market. When the tobacco age of sale increased from 16 to 18 in 2007 it had no impact on black market sales. The most effective way to reduce demand for illicit tobacco is to support more people to quit smoking.</p>

If you have any questions on this briefing or would like to report communications you’ve received from the tobacco industry, please do get in touch: publicaffairs@ash.org.uk