

DEBATING TOBACCO

ASH director, Clive Bates, goes head to head with ex-Tory MP John Carlisle, Executive Director of Industry Affairs at the Tobacco Manufacturers Association. The interview was first published in PUNCH magazine April 11 1998.

Do you smoke?

Bates: No, but I've been a passive smoker for many years, like everyone else.

Carlisle: I've never smoked, although I might have the odd cigar on National No Smoking day as a form of protest.

Is nicotine addictive?

Bates: It's absolutely addictive. You won't get anyone from the tobacco industry to admit that, just a lot of waffle about how television, shopping and sex are addictive. But the industry's internal documents admit that nicotine addiction is the key selling point of their product. Without it it's not viable. However, they've resorted to justifying their products with a civil liberties argument; "adults know the risks and choose to accept them in return for the pleasures of smoking". But an addictive product interferes with a smoker's ability to choose not to smoke. Seventy per cent of smokers say they want to stop, but only a very small number do because it's very difficult.

Carlisle: The definition of addiction is wide and varied. People are addicted to the Internet. Others are addicted to shopping, sex, tea and coffee. The line I would take is that tobacco isn't addictive but habit forming. The person who is really addicted to tobacco is the Chancellor of the Exchequer. He's addicted to tobacco tax; ten and a half billion pounds, before the latest tax increase. Without it he wouldn't have a police force.

Does smoking kill?

Bates: Smoking kills 120,000 people a year. One in two people who smoke will die from it. One in four of them will die prematurely in middle age. Five times as many people die from smoking than all deaths from road accidents, suicides, murders, Aids and manslaughter put together. People are at increased risk of dying of lung cancer or heart disease if they work with smokers.

Carlisle: Everybody knows the opinion the medical establishment have expressed over the last few years. All I can say is that people who smoke are fully aware that that opinion exists and has existed for many years.

Does it cause lung cancer?

Bates: For everybody outside the tobacco industry that question became uncontroversial about 30 years ago. But they will still not accept that smoking causes lung cancer — ask them and you'll get a large amount of evasion rather than a direct acceptance — due to public relations and legal issues, nothing to do with science or the truth. Their internal documents show that their senior scientists accepted this fact in the early Seventies.

Carlisle: Scientists and medical people are far more qualified to comment upon this than myself or Mr Bates. There's no shortage of statistics: it's

extraordinary the amount of research that has gone into our product and the many and varied opinions that people hold about it.

What about passive smoking?

Bates: The Sunday Telegraph recently ran a banner headline: Passive Smoking Does Not Cause Cancer It's official. But the study they refer to actually showed the opposite; a 16 to 17 per cent increase in the risk of getting lung cancer if you are exposed to passive smoking in the home or the workplace. It's difficult to say why they interpreted it like that; either because of naiveté or because a tobacco company provided the interpretation. I can't say what happened, but BAT (British American Tobacco) was quoted in the article and BAT have been pushing this interpretation of these results around the world.

Carlisle: We look at the scientific results and see them in context, rather than just cherry pick, like some organisations. Of the 60 or so tests done over the last 20 years something like 80 per cent don't show any meaningful risk of contracting lung cancer from passive smoking. There was a recent report by the WHO saying that the risk was minimal and insignificant. Four days later, the SCOH (the Scientific Committee on Health) said there was an increased risk. So who does one believe?

How does Formula One tobacco advertising influence audiences?

Bates: There are two rites of passage to adulthood; getting your driving license and smoking. Take the most heroic racing drivers in the world and the fastest cars, cover them in tobacco advertising and it's bound to make a very positive and potent association, particularly to young men. I am very pleased it's going to be banned in the European Union if this directive goes through.

Carlisle: We are not allowed to encourage people to smoke: the point of adverts is purely to persuade people to switch brands and Formula One advertising is a fight between major companies for brand share. Obviously we don't believe that anybody seeing advertisements on a fast car are going to go out and start smoking.

Do tobacco companies pay for product placement?

Bates: It's hard to pin it down. But it's fairly obvious: where there are products shown you can be fairly certain that money has changed hands. The most publicised case being Sylvester Stallone being offered half a million dollars to smoke in Rambo and Rocky.

Carlisle: Not to my knowledge. I have no evidence whatsoever of product placement.

How does the tobacco industry recruit new smokers?

Bates: Three-hundred-and-thirty smokers die every day in Britain. To keep the market stable, they have to recruit roughly 450 a day to replace them and those who give up. They make a very subtle soft sell to children and teenagers by making cigarettes seem a sophisticated adult product. All these very surreal, puzzling or jokey advertisements buy into that, inviting them to join an adult insiders world, a conspiracy of friends. The industry are also

worming their way into quite vibrant young communities; club culture, the comedy scene, the Pride march.

Carlisle: We're a very responsible industry and also the most heavily restricted industry in Europe. We abide by government regulations, which means we are not allowed to attract new smokers; the advertisements can't be of an attractive nature; we can't use young models; we can't advertise in women's magazines where the bulk of the readership is between the ages of 16 and 24. We're emphatic that no one under 16 smokes. And, in many cases, the advertisements are gobbledygook to non-smokers.

Should tobacco advertising and sponsorship be totally banned?

Bates: Yes. You can trace a line of causation from the advertisement to sustaining the smoking habit to illness and death and what justification is there for companies doing that?

Carlisle: This government believes that removing advertising will discourage people from smoking. The perverse thing is that sales could go up. If you take promotion and advertising out of a market you make it disorderly. All that is left for the consumer is price. This could lead to a price war, making more cheap cigarettes available and pushing up consumption. It would also prevent us from talking to our customers. Smokers want information about the product; which brands are available; cigarette content and so on.

Are we in danger of living in a nanny state?

Bates: No. It's a huge toll of carnage — 120,000 people dying every year; many others with respiratory illness, bronchitis, emphysema, heart disease and amputated limbs — so it's quite right for the State to step in. If it was any other consumer product such as cheese with listeria, or beef with BSE, you'd see a draconian counter response.

Carlisle: Without any doubt. This government are intent on telling us how to run our lives. That's an insult to our intelligence. The successive statements made by government ministers as far as legislation is concerned show they want to control people's lives and smoking is one of those areas where it is easy to do so.

Isn't it up to the individual whether they smoke or not?

Bates: Within limits. Nobody's for banning tobacco full stop. But when other people are harmed [through passive smoking] you can't really use the freedom to smoke argument. And although people are free to smoke they find they're not as free as they thought they were to stop.

Carlisle: It's a nonsense to say that the freedom of the individual is impaired. People make up their own minds. Fifteen million people in this country choose to smoke one form of tobacco product. Eleven million have given up in recent times. People take it up at various ages. I was with a well-known professional sportsman recently and he told me he didn't start smoking until he was 30. I have some sympathy with ASH's calls for clean air environments, which is why we encourage provisions in public places for both smokers and non-smokers.

Should smokers who contract smoking-related diseases be given compensation?

Bates: When there are so many people dying it is legitimate to ask whether anyone's to be held responsible. The industry are not candid about the risks and at every opportunity try and confuse everybody. People who might have a claim are those who choose to smoke as impressionable teenagers under peer pressure but find that the product is so addictive it's very hard to give up later on.

Carlisle: These cases will come before the courts. It's difficult for me to comment on them. But I do think it will be very difficult for an individual to claim ignorance of the facts which have been stated on the packet for several years and on advertisements. Nobody can say they are unaware of the risks.

Should smoking be banned in public places?

Bates: Passive smoking is hazardous. The Health and Safety at Work act requires that employers do everything they can to reduce hazards to their employees. In our view, it's quite easy to ban smoking in the workplace and that applies to most public places as people work in restaurants, bars and pubs. But hopefully we'll see a cultural change: the silent unsmoking majority who don't like smokey environments but put up with them in an uncomplaining and British way will eventually tire of it. Pubs and restaurants will respond. Remember that two-thirds of people don't smoke and two-thirds of people who do smoke say they want to quit.

Carlisle: No. There must be a tolerance between the two parties. There must be the availability in offices, factories and restaurants for people to smoke if they wish to, without causing offence to other people. That's why we're taking part wherever we can in moves for better ventilation and no-smoking areas.

Who is the tobacco industry's key market?

Bates: Most smokers now live in developing countries. There are over a billion smokers in the world. That's likely to rise to over 1.6 billion as their marketing really steps up. Women are a particular target. Smoking will be sold to them as an identifier of Western values, modernisation and liberation.

Carlisle: There are new markets opening up for Western cigarettes in the far east and the old eastern bloc. They want them really for sophisticated marketing reasons and probably because their countries are becoming more westernised.

Does the industry feel guilt about selling harmful products?

Bates: Who knows? The tobacco industry are in the business of marketing an addiction which ends for most people in illness or death. I really don't know how they live with themselves, particularly the public relations people. I don't know where a tobacco industry lobbyist goes after tobacco, may be landmines or despotic regimes. They are right at the bottom of the pole.

Carlisle: We are selling a legitimate product. Individuals make their own decisions whether they're going to be ethically influenced or not.

So there's an ethical overview to all this?

Bates: Yes. There's a truly enormous and profitable industry marketing a

highly addictive product that will kill one in two people who use it. To complain that trying to do something about that is an invasion of civil liberties is absurd. **Carlisle:** I don't really believe it's about ethics. It's really quite straight forward: cigarettes are a legitimate product that people are entitled to use. Nobody forces them to smoke. They make up their own mind and the freedom for them to do so is paramount in this argument.

What do you think of each other?

Bates: My views on John Carlisle haven't changed since he came to fame as an apologist for apartheid when he was a conservative MP. Anybody who is a professional apologist and spin doctor for the tobacco industry has a hollow moral core. It's implausible that he's not aware of the issues. Deep down, Carlisle must know he's doing the dirty business of the world's worst industry.

Carlisle: I'm sure he's a very well-meaning chap. But, frankly, he should ask himself as to why suddenly he's the great authority to tell people whether they should smoke or not. Smokers make up their own minds. It's their decision. I respect that. ASH don't, they'd rather turn smokers into pariahs.