



Prolonging the Tobacco Endgame in Aotearoa/ New Zealand: A Tragedy With Global Implications

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Aotearoa/ New Zealand was due to introduce a ground-breaking new law that would potentially achieve smoke-free status by 2025 by banning cigarettes completely for people below a certain age and raising that age annually. This move is vital for the population generally but is particularly important for Māori. The Māori population has significantly higher rates of tobacco-related mortality and morbidity, as well as smoking rates almost 200% higher than the New Zealand European population. However, a newly elected right-wing Government there has made an abrupt U-turn and abandoned this policy. The implications of this about-turn will impact not only Aotearoa/ New Zealand but will undoubtedly setback tobacco control globally.



Cigarettes are the leading cause of preventable mortality and morbidity globally [1]. Estimates of the annual global death toll from the tobacco epidemic exceed 8 million [2]. It is perhaps not surprising that back when annual tobacco-induced mortality topped six million annually one author referred to it as the Golden Holocaust, in reference to the nicotine staining of many of its victims [3]. Many countries have made incremental progress in reducing smoking rates over many decades. Measures to assist this include a host of interventions to reduce demand including graphic warning labels, quit smoking campaigns, extensive advertising controls, nicotine replacement, and support programs to assist those quitting. It must be acknowledged that substantial taxes have also significantly

increased the price of cigarettes, undoubtedly diminishing demand. Demand has also been reduced by laws banning smoking in workplaces, including pubs and clubs.

On the supply side many countries have introduced restrictions on the minimum number of cigarettes sold (i.e. banning the sale of more affordable packs of ten or individual cigarettes), as well as laws restricting the minimum age for purchasing cigarettes. These are often typically 16 or 18 years of age in many European countries. It is related to this issue that Aotearoa/ New Zealand (A/NZ) took the courageous and pioneering step of moving substantively towards becoming smoke-free by banning cigarettes completely for people below a

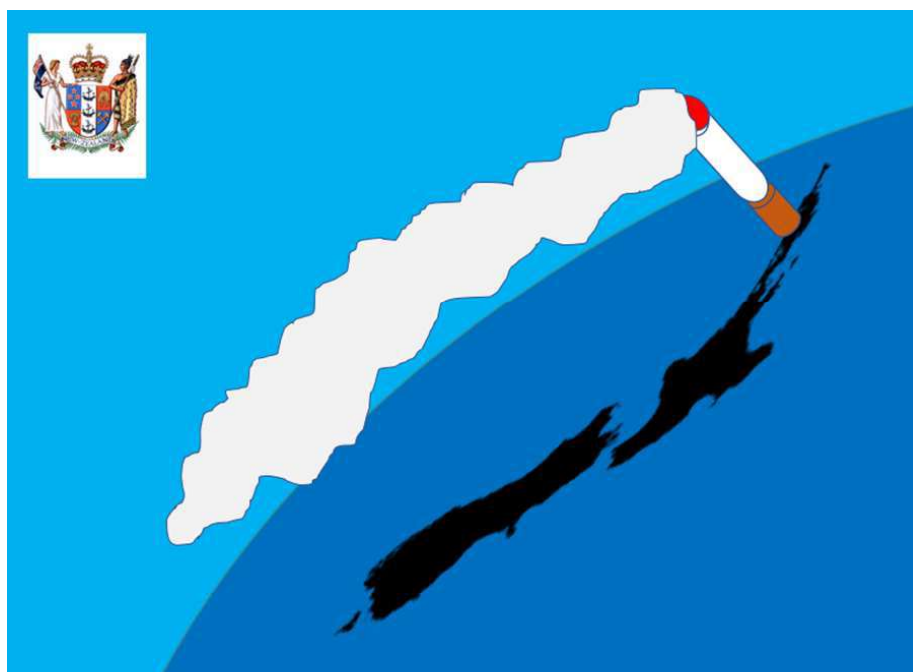


FIGURE 1. Aotearoa, Land of the Long White Cloud

certain age with the prospect of raising that age annually. The aim was to create a tobacco-free generation [4]. This legislation was due to come into effect in July 2024.

This important step offered a clear blue-print to all countries aiming to truly overcome the significant danger posed by tobacco. A crucial element in the bold move in A/NZ was the notably higher smoking rate amongst the Māori population compared to the NZ European ('Pakeha') population [5,6]. Māori health advocates and their allies had pushed hard for this game-changing legislation. A founding document in A/ NZ is the Treaty of Waitangi (Te Tiriti o Waitangi), between the Māori and the Crown, which guarantees a protected status.

The smoking rate among the Māori population is 17.5% for females and 16.8% for males. Among the NZ European (Pakeha) population the equivalent rates are 6% and 6.3% [7]. Although there are variations on definitions of smoke-free internationally, in many countries the level is under 5% [8]. The A/NZ Government had set a target of becoming smoke-free (<5% smoking prevalence) by 2025. It is clear that the majority ethnic group in A/NZ, NZ Europeans/ Pakeha, have almost achieved that target, and yet rates amongst the Māori population are almost 200% higher. The proposed legislation offered the

potential of delivering the tobacco endgame and achieving a smoke-free Aotearoa for all [6]. Estimates suggest that not only would this initiative have achieved this but even among Māori males and females this was forecast to occur by 2027 [9].

However, despite the obvious advantages of this ground-breaking legislation, it has recently been abandoned [10,11]. The reversal comes following the election of a new right-wing government comprised of a coalition of the conservative National Party, the populist New Zealand First Party, and the libertarian ACT New Zealand party. Within the country, it is estimated that this measure would save 80,000 lives, a disproportionate number of which will be Māori [9,10]. The importance of this clear rejection of the tobacco endgame has implications that will reverberate far beyond the shores of A/NZ.

Importantly it signifies to 'Big Tobacco' that even decades after the evidence of the negative health impacts of tobacco use has come to light, alongside evidence of corporate malfeasance in hiding, denying, and subverting this information, progress in tobacco control is not linear [12]. This will undoubtedly embolden the global tobacco industry. The focus of Big Tobacco had increasingly turned to industrializing countries on the assumption that

these emerging markets were largely unregulated and ripe for exploitation [13]. However the U-turn may lead to increased lobbying by Big Tobacco in Europe and elsewhere. Professor Lisa Te Morenga, the Chair of Health Coalition Aotearoa has stated that “This is a major loss for public health, and a huge win for the tobacco industry—whose profits will be boosted at the expense of Kiwi lives” [14].

A particularly worrying aspect of the reversal in A/NZ is that it was not the result of a court case taken by either Big Tobacco or their proxies, civil liberties groups, or even young people themselves. It is instead the result of a right-wing coalition of conservatives, populists and libertarians. The underlying motivation for the abrupt U-turn appears to be little more than a right-wing aversion to taxes and communitarian thinking. Ayeshea Verall, former health minister, has argued that “What’s going on here is that we had a set of measures that would have substantially reduced smoking, was modelled to save 80,000 lives and they’ve (the new government) have reversed it – and they’re doing it just to fund tax cuts” [10].

The international implications of the A/NZ tobacco U-turn are significant. On a wider scale the move to the right evident in many countries within Europe and further afield is likely to mean the reversal in A/NZ is highly likely to prevent similar moves in many countries, despite the public health imperative to introduce such legislation. Sunak’s Conservative government in the UK had committed to introducing similar legislation to combat the threat from tobacco. Despite developments in A/NZ a spokesperson for the UK Government had stated that they “remain committed to that... important long term decision and step to deliver a smoke free generation” [15]. However, given the setback in A/NZ it is perhaps no surprise that the UK Government has since quietly abandoned this plan [16]. A forthcoming election in the UK has undoubtedly hastened the shelving of such ground-breaking legislation. However, it seems unlikely that the UK Conservative party, which is fundamentally committed to small government, individualism, and traditionalism could support a move both tainted with fail-

ure from abroad, as well as one introduced by an A/NZ Labour Government, and then rejected by a right-wing coalition led by A/NZ Conservatives. The Government U-turn on making A/NZ smoke-free has quite rightly been described as ‘Public Health vandalism’, and its long-term negative impacts will be felt globally and for generations [17].

Conflict of Interest

The authors of this article declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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