



# PRESS RELEASE

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## **A GRAND GESTURE – THE TOBACCO DISPLAY BAN**

Grand gestures do have a place in politics and certainly the anti-tobacco lobby see the regulations banning the open display of tobacco in shops to be a key milestone, a gesture that shows that tobacco is not a normal or acceptable product in our society. They have a valid point (although being unacceptable may actually be a selling point to disaffected young people). However, gestures are only allowable if they do no harm in the real world of harsh and difficult compromises.

In Canada, with its long border with the USA, a tobacco display ban seems to have boosted smuggling. Evidence from Iceland and Thailand, where display bans are also in place, does not show that it has reduced the prevalence of smoking. Displays are probably a very marginal influence on smoking behaviour. But if the display ban is a grand gesture that may not do much good, will it do any harm?

There are two distinct markets for tobacco in the UK.

The legitimate one is easy to see. The product is branded and quality-controlled, the taxes on it are paid to the government and it is sold through reputable retailers from open displays. There are procedures in place to stop sales to under-age young people. Sales of this tobacco help to keep retailers in local communities in business.

The illicit market is harder to spot. Smuggled product is often counterfeit, containing much higher levels of toxic chemicals. No taxes are paid. It is sold at markets, from pub car parks or even door-to-door. Sales are often in bulk, which can encourage greater consumption. There is no attempt to prevent sales to young people, possibly the reverse. Proceeds go to fund criminals.

Tobacco is a legal product that will be sold in this country, hopefully in ever-declining quantities to fewer people, for decades to come. It is clearly in society's interests that consumers buy it from legitimate sources that obey the laws governing its supply. As part of on-going attempts by the authorities to stem the smuggled trade, it is vital that there is a clear distinction between it and legitimate outlets. Quite simply, making all proper retailers hide product away removes a key distinction between the two markets and is thus a step backwards.

Clearly there is a balance – this is not a clear-cut black-and-white issue. A lot of people think the grand gesture is worth making. We think it will have a negligible effect on tobacco sales, have a negative effect on legitimate sellers and blur the difference between the two markets. On balance, we believe the decision to ban open displays of tobacco is wrong.

However, the government is unwittingly setting up a massive experiment. Will smaller shops, with the supposed benefit of 3 more years of open tobacco display, gain market share in that time at the expense of larger stores that have already “gone dark”? Perhaps the smugglers will also gain market share from large stores “going dark”? Perhaps tobacco consumption will be reduced? We would expect the government to monitor the impact of the change very carefully and review their regulations at, say, autumn 2013. If the policy is beneficial, then proceed. If it is not working, there is at that point still time to concede the point and rescind it. After all, the Coalition is committed to evidence-based government!

**Notes for editors:**

**The Rural Shops Alliance (RSA) is the national voice for about 7,500 rural retailers. We campaign on their behalf and also help these shops to become more competitive with practical advice and support, to the benefit of thousands of rural communities. Many ‘blue chip’ suppliers and county councils sponsor and partner the work of the RSA. Our direct contact with rural shops and with these organisations means that we keep in close touch with emerging issues and concerns in our fast changing business sector.**

**More Information:**

**Kenneth Parsons**

**- Tel 01761 462371 Mobile 07980 673675**

**Gary Hepburn**

**- Tel 01305 752050**

**Duty Press Contact**

**- Tel 07092 048546**