European watchdog left to die

If an international task force on illicit drugs had lost its entire budget because its work had embarrassed participating governments, we would surely have heard about it. If it emerged that governments close to organised crime had been involved in cutting the budget, and the bureaucrats supervising the task force had been furious with it for exposing the way they supported the drug industry in other areas, we would have heard of little else for weeks. Yet something like this has happened in tobacco control, but it has gone largely unreported.

To those outside Europe, and even to many within it, the significance of tobacco control policy enacted by the European Union (EU) may not be immediately apparent. However, its importance cannot be overemphasised. From the tobacco industry’s perspective, Europe is a massive concentration of population, with high smoking prevalence already, and many, especially in the former Soviet bloc countries, still relatively uninformed about its dangers, and ripe for increasing sales for years to come. Many of these “new” European countries are eagerly implementing EU policy directives as signs of good faith to back up their applications for entry.

Furthermore, the trade and aid links between the EU and many developing countries, often with their roots in former colonial days, mean that the effect of EU standards in many areas of trade are felt in every continent. So it cannot have been comfortable for the tobacco industry in the late 1980s to see the EU apparently heading for a directive that would compel every member state to implement a tobacco advertising ban, and every aspiring member to follow suit as a condition of entry. To add to its discomfort, the Commission of the EU was funding an increasingly effective organisation in Brussels, BASP (Bureau for Action on Smoking Prevention), which was working closely with EU officials and members of parliament, as well as with health organisations in individual EU member states. For many of these, a decent EU policy would be the quickest way of getting their own governments to take the necessary action.

BASP’s grant from the Commission, its only source of income, has not been renewed, and the organisation now exists in name only. The EU’s Europe Against Cancer programme, out of which BASP’s funding was paid, and which naturally contained a major tobacco component, has been scaled down. The programme has not only lost its former independence, but also its budget has been reduced for the next five years at the request of Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom, the same three countries that have repeatedly defeated the draft directive for a tobacco advertising ban. Other good news for the tobacco industry has included a directive on health warnings which, although meaning slight progress for some countries, effectively discourages others from implementing more effective labels; the fact that the EU’s minimum size specification – 4% of the pack face – appears to be acceptable to the tobacco industry should be proof enough of its inadequacy.

BASP’s grant was withdrawn for several reasons. Firstly, its effectiveness must have won it high billing on the tobacco industry’s hit-list. The size and scale of the industry’s lobbying has had to be seen to be believed. Philip Morris, for example, has an office just 50 metres from the main EU Commission building, and numbers among its apparently myriad consultants a former British Prime Minister. At one point, it seemed as if the scale of the industry operation would be its downfall. As so often is the case when a new target comes under fire, parliamentarians and officials declared that they had never seen anything like it; and accounts of some meetings where tobacco industry people were said to outnumber all other categories together may not have been far from the mark. But the hope that this would turn out to be overkill was unfounded; the industry has done its work thoroughly. Ironi- cally, its tone has sometimes been openly contemptuous of the very institution it has been lobbying, such as its advertisements in member states rubbishing “European” legislation on smoking in public places.

Secondly, BASP was in some ways too good at its job, and in particular, too good at research. The very thought of unravelling figures from such a complex and bureaucratic nightmare as the EU’s agricultural support programme would defeat most people, but BASP’s director, Luk Joosens, seconded part-time from a Belgian consumer organisation, painstakingly assembled the data. This research exposed how a staggering billion dollars is spent each year subsidising tobacco growing, including much that is of worthless quality and is dumped in Eastern Europe. This compares to less than $2 million for anti-tobacco work, of which BASP got about $180000. Not surprisingly, these revelations led to severe attacks on EU agricultural policy, but instead of the Commission announcing convincing plans to change, its furious officials blamed BASP for its increasing tendency, as they saw it, “to direct pressure against it”. They now have a rationale for pulling the financial plug, and, although some small health presence is maintained in the corridors of power in Brussels, the industry must feel greatly relieved.

There is convincing evidence that EU officials have been collaborating much more closely with tobacco industry interests recently than with health representatives. Particularly stark is the example of Commission proposals for harmonising tax on hand-rolling (“roll-your-own” (RYO)) tobacco. There are compelling health reasons for harmonising upwards, towards the level in the United Kingdom, where tax and prices of manufactured cigarettes and RYO are similar. In Belgium, Denmark, and the Netherlands, low tax (and hence prices) for RYO, compared
with relatively high taxes on manufactured cigarettes, have led to high consumption of high-tar, high-nicotine RYO.

Despite being inconsistent with EU health policy, and despite stating that “health arguments would support increased taxation of hand-rolling tobacco”, the Commission is now suggesting that it is “essentially a matter for high taxing Member States to tackle, through reducing their rates and/or improved control measures”.

The unconvincing, contradictory discussion of smuggling problems backing up this extraordinary conclusion reeks of tobacco industry influence, and the December issue of Tobacco International did nothing to dispel this. Crowning over the defeat of earlier Commission proposals to raise RYO tax levels, a major article proclaimed that “Lobbying by national tobacco industries, muddled thinking by the bureaucrats in Brussels, and a weak college of commissioners have all combined to consign to the dustbin the latest draft proposals by the EU commission to raise minimum excise levels”. It went on to explain that “While the commission was in the process of formulating its proposals, the tobacco industry could, and did, intervene – this time successfully.”

It is significant that the climb-down followed a conference in Lisbon to discuss the issue, at which 42 tobacco industry representatives took part, but only one health organisation. Despite several requests, health organisations were never informed by the Commission of its initial proposals, whereas the tobacco industry appears to have known them in detail.

The prospects now for effective EU measures against tobacco look poor. Much depends on the regularly changing presidency, which rotates among member states, but already compromises on the advertising directive are being discussed, so that after years of failing to get agreement, at least some measures can be announced.

This all makes the worldwide picture look much brighter for the tobacco industry. In the United States, the industry may be able to tie up President Clinton’s tobacco proposals in the courts until the President is safely tucked up in his retirement home. Together with its victory in the Canadian courts, and the relative lack of threat in Latin America, the Americas are safe enough for the moment. In Australia, recent political changes offer the tobacco industry a glimmer of hope, and it also may be winning back some of its ground in New Zealand, although these are in any case, comparatively small markets. Asia has pockets of resistance, most notably Singapore, but also opportunities to make the mouth water, the ultimate being China. Africa is mostly an open door, despite some worries in the south; the Middle East can sometimes look worrying, but is still doing well for the industry. That just leaves Europe, effectively much expanded and gapping for cigarettes. If this enormous market were to be blighted by tobacco control legislation that actually worked, the primary effect would be bad enough, but ripple effects in other regions could be even worse. For the moment, though, the worst seems to be over. It is champagne, rather than tears, that is likely to be flowing in the boardrooms of the multinational tobacco companies.

DAVID SIMPSON
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Euro Quit and Win

Apart from the obvious disparity in resources, one of the starkest contrasts between public health and the tobacco industry is that for the most part, anti-tobacco health campaigns are organised on a national, state, or district scale, whereas the international tobacco industry is, well, just that: international. It is thus a welcome exception to find a small but significant example of international cooperation in the European Region of the World Health Organisation (WHO), the European Quit and Win ’96 smoking cessation campaign.

Quit and Win programmes encourage people to stop smoking with the positive incentive that if they succeed, and provide appropriate verification, their names will be entered in a prize draw. Often the top prizes are of high value – and high publicity potential – such as exotic holidays. In 1994, WHO’s Regional Office for Europe co-ordinated such schemes in 13 countries, as part of its Countrywide Integrated Non-communicable Disease Intervention (CINDI) programme. Some 63 000 smokers took part, and the organisers claim that an evaluation of a sample of these showed that 15–20% may have stopped smoking for good. This year, it is hoped that well over 100 000 smokers will enrol in 20 countries.

Having such a positive image, Quit and Win schemes are difficult for the tobacco industry to sabotage, though, with a target population of 52 million smokers overall, the industry is unlikely to be very worried about the 0.03% to 0.04% who may stop smoking this year as a result of the programme. However, any publicity generated in participating countries is likely to be helpful, and the network of cooperation can then be used for further, larger efforts in the future. – DS

Made in Hong Kong, damaged in Britain?

With only a year to go before Hong Kong reverts to Chinese rule, the colony’s government this year has its last chance to implement its own legislation, including public health legislation on tobacco. It is expected that, after handover in 1997, Hong Kong will be run very much as it is today, so legislation enacted now is unlikely to be repealed by China. Its present colonial power, the United