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Emma Crosby: Presenter, Sky News

Let's talk more now about our top story. Recommendations, which would effectively ban smoking in England for young people as they grow up. If proposals of the review were accepted by government, the legal age to buy cigarettes would rise by a year, every year, until no one can get them.

Joining me now from central London is Deborah Arnott. She is the Chief Executive of ASH, which stands for Action on Smoking and Health. Also joined this hour from Cambridge by Simon Clark, who is Director of the smokers group, Forest.

Welcome to you both.

Deborah, let's start with you. We understand that Sajid Javid, is a reformed smoker, he gave up smoking last year, apparently. He was asking for radical plans. Is that what he's got?

Deborah Arnott: Chief Executive, ASH

Yes, but it's not just this raising the age of sale. I mean, that's something the media is focused on but actually that's one of fifteen recommendations and his must-do, his top must-do is that the government should invest an additional hundred and twenty five million in supporting smokers to quit because raising the age of sale will help reduce smoking uptake amongst young people, but we've got 6 million adult smokers and this isn't a lifestyle choice. It's an addiction and addiction they most of them entered into as children and they need help to quit and they want help to quit.

Emma Crosby: Presenter, Sky News

Simon, let's bring you in here. For a generation of young people in the UK, in England I should say, could grow up not being able to legally buy tobacco, doesn't sound too bad to us, what do you think?

Simon Clark: Director, Forest

I think it's all about infantilising the population. Fifteen years ago the legal age of sale of tobacco was raised from sixteen to eighteen, and we supported that because it seemed completely logical to bring tobacco into line with alcohol. Now up until today we were told the recommendation would be to raise it to twenty one. Now we're told the recommendation is to raise it by one year, every year. Now that means if it was introduced this year, for example, in twelve years time a thirty year old would not be allowed to buy tobacco and ten years after that a forty year-old would not be

allowed to buy tobacco. I mean, this is absolutely nuts. I mean not only would it push more and more people towards the black market because prohibition always works really well, doesn't it, but it infantilizes the country because it says that at eighteen you are not old enough to make decisions about drinking or smoking. We don't want to encourage people to smoke. We've always believed that smoking should be an adult choice. We don't want to see children smoking at all but once you are eighteen you are legally an adult and you should be allowed to make certain choices and Deborah said it's not a lifestyle choice. It is true there are some people who get addicted and wish they had never started, but there are great many people who enjoy smoking, take pleasure from smoking or perhaps they smoke to relieve their anxiety or stress. There are lots of reasons why people smoke and to try and prohibit it is absolute nonsense.

Emma Crosby: Presenter, Sky News

Fair point Deborah?

Deborah Arnott: Chief Executive, ASH

Not really. I mean.

Emma Crosby: Presenter, Sky News

Why not?

Deborah Arnott: Chief Executive, ASH

Well first of all what Simon doesn't tell you is that he is a non-smoker, that he has made a very good living for over 20 years from being paid by the tobacco industry....

Emma Crosby: Presenter, Sky News

Let's not get personal. Ok.

Deborah Arnott: Chief Executive, ASH

...to say that smoking is a lifestyle choice. This is not a lifestyle choice and he knows it's not a lifestyle choice. The tobacco manufacturers lied for many years about the addictiveness of smoking and addictiveness that they knew full well existed and we've got to stop that. It's not a lifestyle choice. It's an addiction that children start, thinking that they won't get addicted and for every child who starts and hundreds start smoking every day, two-thirds go on to become daily smokers, addicted, who find it really hard to quit and most of them would go on to be lifelong smokers and many of them will die prematurely and that reduces ten years of life....

Emma Crosby: Presenter, Sky News

Let me just come in here Deborah. What about those who just enjoy smoking, who aren't addicted to it and want to have that right to be able to do that. I mean, at eighteen you can vote in this country, you can get married in this country, you can drink alcohol, you can buy a home, so is it not a bit of a nanny state to then suggest but you can't go and buy tobacco legally?

Deborah Arnott: Chief Executive, ASH

Can we split into two separate issues? What about those who like smoking and don't see it as an addiction? Well, we know from surveys that the vast majority want to quit, and even more wish they had never started, and none of them want their children to be smokers. So, you know, this thing that there's lots of people who just enjoy smoking, it's not true, and the thing about it relaxing them, well actually the evidence is good because it's an addiction, it's a craving, it's a relief from craving, when you have a cigarette that makes you feel better in the short term but longer-term if you quit then quitting smoking has an effect on your levels of anxiety and depression, equivalent to taking antidepressants without you know while actually reducing your cost because you're not spending money on tobacco and improving your health as well as your well-being.....

Emma Crosby: Presenter, Sky News

Okay, Simon, I know you....

Deborah Arnott: Chief Executive, ASH

....and that's the first half and then....

Emma Crosby: Presenter, Sky News

Okay, I need to bring Simon back in here. No, no, let me bring Simon back in otherwise it's not going to be a fair debate.

Simon, what would you say to then? You say you don't want to see children smoking and yet we've been talking about during the pandemic and the lockdown there has been a big jump in the number of people under the age of 18, taking up smoking, going against the grain. I mean, you must be alarmed by that?

Simon Clark: Director, Forest

Well, I think there was certainly a blip during COVID for a lot of reasons. I don't see that continuing. The fact is....

Emma Crosby: Presenter, Sky News

Why do you not see that continuing? I mean, are you not hesitant to say that?

Simon Clark: Director, Forest

I mean historically, smoking rates have been coming down for fifty or sixty years. I honestly don't see that changing, and we don't have a problem with smoking rates continuing to fall, as long as it's done on a voluntary basis. What we object to are laws and regulations that try to bully, coerce and force people to give up smoking. I mean, these are recommendations from this report, for example, try and encourage more smokers to switch to reduced risk products such as e-cigarettes and we totally support that as long as and say it's done on a voluntary basis.

E-cigarettes empower people to quit smoking because for many people they are just as pleasurable as smoking but what you cannot have is this constant attempt to prohibit and coerce. That simply does not work, it will drive smoking underground into the hands of the criminal gangs and that's the last thing we want because criminal gangs don't care who they sell cigarettes to. They will sell cigarettes to children.

Emma Crosby: Presenter, Sky News

Fair point Deborah?

Inaudible comments - Deborah Arnott and Simon Clark**Deborah Arnott: Chief Executive, ASH**

Simon makes these arguments about any and every policy. They are always the same arguments....

Emma Crosby: Presenter, Sky News

What is the answer to that then because I mean is it not fair to say....

Deborah Arnott: Chief Executive, ASH

...and actually there is no evidence.

Emma Crosby: Presenter, Sky News

You don't want young people...

Deborah Arnott: Chief Executive, ASH

...my answer...

Emma Crosby: Presenter, Sky News

You don't want young people buying cigarettes on the black market do you, which is unregulated and could be very dangerous? Surely you don't want that?

Deborah Arnott: Chief Executive, ASH

Well, unregulated cigarettes are no more dangerous than regulated cigarettes because basically the act of smoking, whatever you smoke, is dangerous but to go to the point, actually when the age of sales increased from sixteen to eighteen, it didn't lead to an increase in the illicit market, it didn't force sixteen year olds to go and buy black market cigarettes. That's an issue of enforcement. It's not about the age of sale and they raised the age of sale in the US from eighteen to twenty one and it reduced smoking rates in eighteen, nineteen and twenty year-olds by 30%. It's not making it a criminal act to buy cigarettes. That's what we're calling for. It's about making it illegal to sell, and that makes it more likely that young people will find it difficult to get hold of cigarettes and less likely to start smoking and I don't see why anyone would disagree with that and the point about being an adult, you know, that you could do all these other things at eighteen. We know that the human brain is not fully mature at eighteen and teenagers take terrible risks. If we can stop people from starting to smoke until the age of twenty one, almost no one will go on to become a smoker.

Emma Crosby: Presenter, Sky News

Okay. Simon let's bring you back in.

I mean, what would be more realistic, what would be a more agreeable set of recommendations from your point of view and what do you say to those who always say in these debates, I mean, you are just protecting the pockets of tobacco giants, not the health of young people in this country?

Simon Clark: Director, Forest

Well, I would say we have always opposed children smoking. It's not good for adults who smoke. The fact that children smoke is always used as a stick with which to beat them. I would say....

Emma Crosby: Presenter, Sky News

If you oppose that surely you believe that there is a place then for more stringent rules on younger people getting hold of tobacco?

Simon Clark: Director, Forest

Well the problem is how far do you go because we talked about.....

Emma Crosby: Presenter, Sky News

How far shall we go?

Simon Clark: Director, Forest

Well, we talk about raising the legal age of sale. In the recent weeks that's been talked about, people have talked about the legal smoking age. There is no legal smoking age for a very good reason and that is do we really want to see fifteen to sixteen year-olds being prosecuted by the police and police time and effort being taken up chasing children who might be smoking in the park? No, we don't. What we need to do is enforce existing regulations. Existing regulations say it is an offense to sell tobacco to anybody under the age of 18 and on top of that, we need more education and education is actually working. Smoking rates amongst every age group including children are at the lowest ever level. This is not some national crisis for heaven's sake. Smoking rates have been going down for fifty years. They will continue to go down. What we don't need is unnecessary government intervention.

Emma Crosby: Presenter, Sky News

Are you a smoker, Mr Clark?

Simon Clark: Director, Forest

No, never smoked. I am overweight. I know I want to lose weight and I don't want the government forcing me to lose weight.

Emma Crosby: Presenter, Sky News

Fair enough. Well, we think you look perfectly fine just the way you are. Thank you so much for joining us.

Simon Clark, Director of the Smokers group Forest.

Ofcourse, we are joined also by Deborah Arnott, Chief Executive of ASH. Deborah, again, thank you very much for your time.

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