

COMMENT

BANNED WAGON

Simon Clark, the Director of FOREST, marks ten years since the smoking ban in 2007 and demands that genuine liberals must be prepared to fight against further attacks on our lifestyle choices, by the "bully state"

WORDS BY SIMON CLARK

The smoking ban is either the greatest thing the last Labour government did or it's the ultimate expression of the nanny state. Introduced ten years ago, the legislation was brought in following a relentless campaign carried out by a small cabal of professional, well-organised anti-smoking activists.

Leading the way was Action on Smoking and Health, a taxpayer-funded pressure group. Months after MPs voted to ban smoking in all enclosed public places, ASH boasted that the success of their campaign had literally been a "confidence trick". Looking back it's easy to see why. Those demanding a comprehensive ban with no exemptions for pubs, bars or private members' clubs were a small but vocal minority with relatively little public support.

Worse, there was no need for legislation. Voluntary restrictions on smoking had been in place for years. Long before the state stepped in most offices and many restaurants were smoke free. Some, like the Notting Hill restaurant run by TV chef Antony Worrall Thompson, had sought a compromise. Situated on two floors the restaurant allowed smoking on one floor while prohibiting it on the other. Customers had a choice and it worked.

Today younger generations are conditioned to believe that before the ban every pub and bar was a fug of toxic smoke that suffocated customers and staff without mercy. As a lifelong non-smoker and a regular pub goer for many years I can honestly remember only one occasion when I entered a pub and it was so smoky that my eyes watered. Come the new millennium, many bars had installed extremely effective air filtration systems so the smoky environments of old are increasingly rare.

Almost as nauseating is the smug claim that "I no longer stink or have to wash my clothes when I return from the pub." Did no-one wash their clothes before the smoking ban? Did no-one

ever sweat or get their clothes dirty in other ways? Was it the norm, before the smoking ban, to wear the same shirt or blouse, day after day? I never recall this being a problem until a handful of anti-smoking zealots began to make an issue of it.

Even contributors to *Boisdale Life* have bought into this myth. At the 'Editors Lunch' to mark the magazine's birthday earlier this year I was disappointed to find little support for amending the legislation. Interestingly



Staunch defender of the right to choose one's own lifestyle (and Britain's greatest living artist) David Hockney

that puts them at odds with the general public because even in recent years polls have consistently found a small majority in favour of allowing well-ventilated smoking rooms in pubs and clubs.

Frankly I sensed something that dare not speak its name – snobbery. At *Boisdale* it's not enough to have a terrace where people can smoke. It has to be called a 'Cigar Terrace'. I imagine it's designed to appeal to a certain

demographic that considers cigarettes to be a bit vulgar or second rate. A cigar, like a fine wine, needs to be enjoyed at a leisurely pace. Hence the attraction of *Boisdale's* warm and comfortable smoking areas. However, if you want to smoke a cigarette you have to nip outside for five or ten minutes. It's not ideal, especially in bad weather, but millions have adapted, albeit grudgingly, to the enforced change.

With bar restaurants and child-friendly pubs in the ascendancy, I also sense very little interest in the fate of the traditional British boozer. Figures show there are 11,383 fewer pubs in England compared to 2006, a decline of 20.7 per cent since the smoking ban was introduced in 2007. While this is part of a long-term trend and the smoking ban is not the only factor, evidence shows a clear acceleration in pub closures after the legislation was enforced, with pubs in poorer urban areas suffering most.

Recent proposals by at least one London borough to extend the smoking ban to outdoor areas including beer gardens are as authoritarian as they are predictable. This addiction to excessive regulation must be challenged. Cigarettes or cigars, smoking is a legitimate habit enjoyed by millions of ordinary, decent people. Pubs and bars must be allowed to accommodate adults who wish to light up.

Final thought: the smoking ban gave the green light to a level of intolerance that has been depressing to behold. Note too, how easily people have been persuaded that even the briefest exposure to 'second-hand' smoke is a genuine health risk. This has been achieved by a combination of zealots and fanatics working hand-in-hand with a well-funded public health industry that believes the end justifies the means. The 'smoke free' legislation is one of the most egregious examples of the nanny – no, make that bully – state. If we don't take a stand, choices that non-smokers hold dear will be threatened too. ♦