

— LETTERS  
on LIBERTY



**FREEDOM: UP IN SMOKE?**

Simon Clark

**— LETTERS**  
**on LIBERTY**

Welcome to *Letters on Liberty* from the Academy of Ideas. *Letters on Liberty* is a modest attempt to reinvigorate the public sphere and argue for a freer society.

[academyofideas.org.uk/letters](https://academyofideas.org.uk/letters)



Since its foundation in 2000, the Academy of Ideas has hosted thousands of public debates, festivals, forums and salons where people from all walks of life come together to debate often-controversial topics and to challenge contemporary knee-jerk orthodoxies.

We always hold on to one defining principle:  
free speech allowed.

[academyofideas.org.uk](https://academyofideas.org.uk)

## *What are Letters on Liberty?*

It's not always easy to defend freedom. Public life may have been locked down recently, but it has been in bad health for some time.

Open debate has been suffocated by today's censorious climate and there is little cultural support for freedom as a foundational value. What we need is rowdy, good-natured disagreement and people prepared to experiment with what freedom might mean today.

We stand on the shoulders of giants, but we shouldn't be complacent. We can't simply rely on the thinkers of the past to work out what liberty means today, and how to argue for it.

Drawing on the tradition of radical pamphlets from the seventeenth century onwards - designed to be argued over in the pub as much as parliament - *Letters on Liberty* promises to make you think twice. Each *Letter* stakes a claim for how to forge a freer society in the here and now.

We hope that, armed with these *Letters*, you take on the challenge of fighting for liberty.

*Academy of Ideas team*



## FREEDOM: UP IN SMOKE?

One of my favourite photographs was taken at Smoke on the Water, an annual boat-party hosted by the campaign group FOREST (Freedom Organisation for the Right to Enjoy Smoking Tobacco). On the open rear deck of a Mississippi-style paddle steamer, with Tower Bridge and the evening sun behind him, stands a man in his mid to late thirties. He is unconventionally good looking, with a strong, craggy face, and clamped between his large, uneven teeth is a burning cigarette. But what really stands out is the broad grin on the man's face. Is it a moment of happiness, bravado, or both?

I like it because there's nothing fake about it. Caught in the moment, it's a genuine expression of joy and rebelliousness. Today, aside from paparazzi pics of 'celebrities' with a cigarette or cigar in hand, smokers are more likely to be snapped huddled outside a building, looking serious or glum. After all, the 'official' view is that smoking tobacco is a terrible addiction, most smokers would quit if they could, and the majority regret ever having touched the evil weed.

That's not my experience. I don't smoke - never have, apart from the very occasional cigarette or cigar. But I have known many smokers - from friends at university

over 40 years ago to the people I've met as director of FOREST for the past 20 years - and the majority enjoyed smoking and didn't want to quit.

Despite this, the urge to ban consenting adults from enjoying a smoke is widespread across the political divide to the extent that an announcement by a Conservative prime minister of a draconian plan to ban the sale of cigarettes to future generations of adults - what Rishi Sunak called the 'biggest public-health intervention in a generation' - is supported without argument or debate by the Labour Party.

This is despite the fact that we know that such interventions rarely reduce smoking rates by any significant extent. On the contrary, coercive measures designed to 'nudge' smokers to quit - from smoking and display bans, plain packaging, the ban on menthol cigarettes and so on - have made some even more determined to smoke.

Those that have stopped have usually done so as a result of a health scare, becoming a parent, or for economic reasons (punitive taxation on tobacco forcing many a hand). What few people want to admit is that market-driven, reduced-risk products like e-cigarettes have done far more to reduce smoking rates than any policy-waving politician.

A refusal to be bullied may be one explanation for the stubbornness of confirmed smokers (those who don't want to quit). Another is that, despite the serious and universally known health risks, many people do actually enjoy it. Yes, nicotine can be addictive, and smoking can be a difficult habit to break. But what anti-smoking zealots refuse to acknowledge is that, for a lot of people, smoking provides enormous pleasure and comfort. But don't take my word for it.

---

## The pleasure principle

---

According to the Rt Hon Craig Whittaker MP:

*'Every smoker is different. The reason they smoke and the reason they struggle to quit is different, and their ultimate method of quitting is different, too. In my case, after smoking for the vast majority of the last 40 years, I can honestly say that I totally enjoyed virtually every cigarette I had over those decades.'*<sup>i</sup>

Broadcaster and journalist Jeremy Clarkson agrees:

*'I've smoked nearly 630,000 fags over the past 43 years and, aside from the very first, there hasn't been a single one that I didn't enjoy.'*<sup>ii</sup>

Interviewing artist David Hockney in August this year, radio legend Melvyn Bragg also sounded nostalgic for his old habit:

*'Whenever I've sat down to talk with David, he would be smoking... sometimes he made me feel I'd been chicken to give up fags, which I had enjoyed.'*<sup>iii</sup>

Although all three are now ex-smokers, the enjoyment they derived from smoking is not unusual. In 2016, I commissioned a report by the Centre for Substance Use Research (CSUR) in Glasgow whose researchers conducted a survey of over 600 'confirmed smokers'. Over 95 per cent gave pleasure as their primary reason for smoking, with 35 per cent suggesting that smoking was part of their identity. Well over half liked the physical effect of nicotine, and 55 per cent liked the way smoking provided 'time for oneself'. A bit like my smiling man, 52 per cent liked the taste or smell of tobacco and 49 per cent liked the ritual involved in smoking.

As for quitting, 77 per cent expected to smoke for many years with only five per cent envisaging a time in the near future when they might have stopped. Although a majority - 56 per cent - felt that they were addicted to smoking, many described the habit as a personal choice rather than behaviour determined by their dependence on nicotine.



These results have been reflected anecdotally for years, but it was nice to have them confirmed by a credible and independent research group. In the words of Dr Neil McKeganey, director of the CSUR:

*'The implications of these findings from a smoking cessation perspective are significant because there is a clear gulf between the way smoking is typically viewed as a negative, somewhat reprehensible, behaviour and how the smokers themselves saw smoking as a source of pleasure, a choice rather than an addiction.'*<sup>iv</sup>

The truth, often refuted by anti-smoking campaigners, is that smoking is enjoyed by a great many people - that's why they smoke - and efforts to force people to quit are as much a war on pleasure and freedom as a war on tobacco.

---

## **Smoking is normal**

---

For decades, smokers have been characterised in film and on stage as rebels or bad guys. Think James Dean, Keith Richards and many, many more. It's hard to argue they were rebelling though because for a substantial part of the twentieth century the majority of men were smokers anyway, so what were they rebelling against? Far from being an act of defiance,

smoking was, and continues to be, completely normal for many people.

It may be true that some smokers radiate a certain contrariness, but few smokers, even today, consider themselves rebels. I witnessed this some years ago when attending a conference in Seville organised by a group called Club de Fumadores. Participants were ordinary people from a wide range of backgrounds.

They came from all over Europe and were attending the event, not because they were driven by some 'libertarian' philosophy or a desire to rebel, but because, as longstanding smokers, they were bemused by the unremitting war on tobacco. They accepted the health risks attached to smoking, and simply wanted to be left alone to enjoy their habit in peace. The idea that they might march down Whitehall or the Champs-Élysées in defence of smoking was a strange concept.

Not all smokers are quite so passive, of course. David Hockney insists his love of smoking *is* a form of rebellion. In 2020, aged 82, he told *The Sunday Times* he had no regrets about smoking, and would continue smoking as an act of defiance. *The MailOnline*, which also reported his comments, noted:

*'A desire to live life with purpose and pleasure has always been fundamental to him and his art - as such, it's no surprise that David won't be curtailing his smoking habit.'*<sup>v</sup>

While many ordinary smokers might have been cowed into silence, this rebellious spirit hasn't died among television writers, either. One of my favourite television programmes in 2022 was *Slow Horses*. Based on the books of Mick Herron, the main character is an ageing, uncouth MI5 agent called Jackson Lamb, played brilliantly by Gary Oldman. Like the eponymous lead character in the *Cormoran Strike* series of novels, written by Robert Galbraith (aka JK Rowling), Lamb is an habitual smoker. Unlike *Mad Men*, the Madison Avenue inspired series that was set in the Sixties and featured a prodigious amount of smoking, *Slow Horses* and *Strike* represent a present in which smoking may be a minority habit but it's still normal.

---

## **Smoking is a feminist issue**

---

Arguably, the real rebels when it comes to smoking have been women. In the first half of the twentieth century, smoking was a symbol of liberation and emancipation - and equality with men. The phrase 'torches of freedom' was used by advertisers to

attempt to combat the social taboo of women smoking in public. While some recognised the positives in opening up public spaces for women, critics still argue that feminism was used by the tobacco industry to exploit women and acquire a new generation of customers.

This patronising view continues today. Both ‘slim’ and flavoured cigarettes have been banned in favour of ‘gender-neutral’ cigarettes, for fear they enticed women to smoke. Likewise, many argued that plain packaging was introduced because the tobacco industry was conspiring to seduce women with ‘glitzy’ or pastel colours.

*But smoking - historically a male-dominated habit - has often become a symbol of emancipation.*

In January 2013, the Irish Cancer Society published a report entitled ‘Women and Smoking: time to face the crisis’, that accused tobacco companies of ‘targeting’ women with ‘elegant, feminine packaging’. Women in Ireland, we were told, were ‘under siege’ from firms that were trying ‘to reel in women by creating candy-coloured packaging, white packaging, “women-only” brands, low-tar, and new, super-slim products’.<sup>vi</sup>

Not everyone was hoodwinked. According to political researcher Nuala Walsh:

*I like attractive things as much as the next person, but I am not stupid. I might be a woman, but I know that cigarettes pose a health risk. A pastel-coloured box does not change either my knowledge of science or my awareness of my own body and the fact that, yes, wow, perhaps these cigarettes are making me breathless. You don't have to wave an 'elegant' looking box in front of my eyes like a magic wand for me to say, "Oh wait, no, they're pink? That's fine then, they can't be bad for me."*<sup>vii</sup>

The previous year, Cancer Research UK had published its own report accusing the tobacco industry of using 'pale or pastel colours' and images denoting 'femininity, style, sophistication and attractiveness' to entice women to smoke. Women being dazzled by pink, how sexist is that? Claire Fox, director of the Academy of Ideas, obviously thought so:

*What lies at the heart of women's liberation is FREEDOM. And yes - that means being free to choose pretty packets if we fancy and free to indulge in petty vices such as smoking if we choose.'*<sup>viii</sup>

But smoking - historically a male-dominated habit - has often become a symbol of emancipation. In countries where women's oppression is not a subject

for a panel debate, but a lived experience, lighting up can become a revolutionary act. While criticising the French burkini ban in 2016, journalist Juliet Samuel began by noting:

*In Manbij, Syria, the men are cutting their beards. The women are smoking cigarettes and uncovering their faces. Newly liberated from the rule of Isil, they're expressing the most basic freedom a human can possess: control over their own bodies. These are the freedoms the West holds dear.'*<sup>ix</sup>

What supporters of public-health diktats don't seem to understand is that the freedom to smoke represents a much bigger freedom - the ability of citizens to make their own decisions.

---

## A quiet rebellion

---

But what of the next generation? 'Smoking down 79 per cent on Trinity College campus but vaping up', trumpeted the *Irish Independent* earlier this year. That, at least, was the headline. The actual report was rather more nuanced: 'Trinity College in Dublin has seen a 79 per cent reduction in observed smokers on its campus following the introduction of restrictions.'<sup>x</sup>

Inevitably, if you impose restrictions on where people can light up, the number of smokers in those areas will drop. But this doesn't mean that, overall, fewer people are smoking - all that happens is that smoking is displaced from one area to another. In 2004, the Oxford Union banned smoking in its previously profitable bar. Many students voted with their feet and started drinking in the local pubs where smoking wasn't banned. The Union found itself losing so much money that it had to reverse the ban. A similar story is told by a student from Trinity College, Dublin:

*Walking into campus through the Arts Block one morning, I was confronted by a screen declaring Trinity a 'tobacco-free campus'. Not only was I surprised, having not heard this once in my six months of studying here, but my confusion was further justified once I walked past the arts block and saw the revolving cast of smokers standing outside. Trinity may declare itself tobacco free, but it is certainly not in practice.'*<sup>xi</sup>

Meanwhile, *The Tab* Student Smoking Survey 2021 revealed that '52 per cent of students who took our survey say they smoke cigarettes'.<sup>xii</sup> That surprised me, but one explanation (other than the fact that it was a self-selecting poll) may be that many students are social smokers - they can't afford to be heavy smokers, nor are they addicted to smoking. Despite the health concerns about smoking at this point raising awareness for themselves, there remains a quiet

rebellion among the young against the killjoys who want to dictate how we live our lives.

---

## Don't let the bossy boots win

---

According to historian Alwyn Turner, smoking is 'probably a lost cause'.<sup>xiii</sup> Many people would no doubt agree with him, but I'm not so sure. Smoking has been around for centuries, if not thousands of years. We now know a lot more about the potential health risks, and for that reason most people choose not to acquire the habit. But smoking remains a source of pleasure for a significant number of people.

Responding to the chief executive of Philip Morris International, the global tobacco giant that is agitating for a 'smoke-free' future, investment analyst Rae Maile wryly observed, 'on any reasonable expectation, there will still be a very, very large number of smokers 20, 30, 40 years from now'.<sup>xiv</sup> David Hockney's words should also ring in Sunak's ears:

*'Smoking for me is a deep pleasure and 1.1 billion people in the world seem to agree. It can never be stopped; smokers would just start growing their own tobacco. But we need more people to defend it, otherwise the bossy boots will win in England.'*<sup>xv</sup>



The good news is, it's not just oldies like Hockney who are standing up for smoking, and smokers. Political commentator Reem Ibrahim quit smoking at 19, and currently vapes. To her great credit, and unlike many ex-smokers who have switched, she advocates vaping but still defends those who prefer to smoke.

*The fate of the smoker should not just be the business of those lighting up.*

Twenty-four-year-old journalist Kara Kennedy's article 'An ode to smoking' was notable for many reasons, but mostly for its unambiguous celebration of a habit dismissed by some as a solitary, miserable experience:

*I don't think it's a coincidence that the last year has been the most fulfilling of my life. My closest friendships have been strengthened through hours of conversation in smoking areas, my favourite nights have been in a dusty members club in Soho that lets you smoke when the curtains are closed, and the most interesting conversations I've had have been sparked by someone asking, "can I borrow your lighter?". Smoking is the great unifier. It weeds out the morning joggers, the green-shake drinkers, and brings together the ones who are just trying to find some pleasure in life.' <sup>xvi</sup>*

Defending the right to smoke matters, not because smoking is a good or sensible thing to do, but because adults should be allowed to make decisions that are neither good nor sensible. What is clear is that the end of smoking has been greatly exaggerated. Whether it's the busy smoking areas outside pubs and bars, or the portrayal of fictional (and habitual) smokers on TV, evidence suggests that smoking is not a thing of the past.

We can't let the language of public health - used by politicians of every party - be weaponised to remove our freedom. The fate of the smoker should not just be the business of those lighting up. The spirit of defiance must inspire us all to fight for the freedom to make our own decisions, and choose our own paths in life.

Let's give the final word to Hockney, who turned 86 in July 2023, and is as spirited as ever in support of a habit he has enjoyed for more than six decades:

*I'm 100 per cent sure that I am going to die of a smoking-related illness or a non-smoking related illness. But I couldn't imagine not smoking, and when people tell me to stop I always point this out. I've done it for 68 years, so are you telling me I'm doing something wrong? Fuck off.* xvii

## References

- <sup>i</sup> Whittaker, Craig, ‘MP Craig Whittaker reveals how heated tobacco helped him quit smoking after 40 years’, *Yorkshire Post*, 3 July 2023
- <sup>ii</sup> Clarkson, Jeremy, ‘My foolproof recipe to kick the fags - chewing gum and a hideous chest infection’, *The Sunday Times*, 27 August 2017
- <sup>iii</sup> Bragg, Melvyn, ‘David Hockney: “All I need is the hand, the eye, the heart”’, *The Sunday Times*, 20 August 2023
- <sup>iv</sup> McKeganey, Neil, ‘The Pleasure of Smoking: the views of confirmed smokers’, Centre for Substance Use Research, December 2016
- <sup>v</sup> Green, Jessica, ‘Don’t tell me not to smoke! Artist David Hockney, 82, reveals he sees his 60-year habit as an “act of defiance”’, *MailOnline*, 10 February 2020
- <sup>vi</sup> O’Sullivan, Claire, ‘Tobacco firms “targeting” women with elegant, feminine packaging’, *Irish Examiner*, 11 January 2013
- <sup>vii</sup> Walsh, Nuala, ‘Women aren’t being “tricked” into smoking by pretty packaging’, *The Journal*, 24 January 2013
- <sup>viii</sup> Fox, Claire, ‘Freedom also comes in pink’, *Spectator*, 5 May 2012
- <sup>ix</sup> Samuel, Juliet, ‘French burkini bans are a foolish act of fanaticism’, *Telegraph*, 14 August 2016
- <sup>x</sup> O’Regan, Eilish, ‘Smoking down 79 per cent on Trinity College campus but vaping up’, *Irish Independent*, 25 April 2023

- <sup>xi</sup> Pascoe, Phoebe, 'Student social smoking at an all-time high in Dublin', *Trinity News*, April 2022
- <sup>xii</sup> Shaw, Danny, 'It's official: Half of all student smokers only smoke when they're drunk', *The Tab*, 8 September 2021
- <sup>xiii</sup> Turner, Alwyn, 'Settin' the woods on fire', *Lion & Unicorn*, 22 July 2023
- <sup>xiv</sup> Shah, Oliver, 'Jacek Olczak: PMI's Marlboro man blows smoke at "stupid" critics', *The Sunday Times*, 30 July 2023
- <sup>xv</sup> Hockney, David, 'Britain needs a cigarette', *UnHerd*, 4 June 2021
- <sup>xvi</sup> Kennedy, Kara, 'An ode to smoking', *Spectator World*, 20 December 2022
- <sup>xvii</sup> Hockney, David, 'Britain needs a cigarette', *UnHerd*, 4 June 2021





## *Author*

Simon Clark is director of the smokers' rights group FOREST (Freedom Organisation for the Right to Enjoy Smoking Tobacco).

Founded in 1979, FOREST represents adults who choose to

smoke and campaigns against excessive regulations on smoking, tobacco and other nicotine products.

A non-smoker, Simon appears regularly on TV and radio defending adults who choose to smoke, vape or indulge in other 'problem' lifestyles. He writes a blog, 'Taking Liberties', and is the author of *Hands Off Our Packs: diary of a political campaign*.



## *Illustrations*

Jan Bowman is an artist and author of *This is Birmingham*. See her work at [janbow.com](http://janbow.com)

## *Letters on Liberty identity*

Alex Dale

## *Pamphlet and website design*

Martyn Perks

# — LETTERS on LIBERTY

[academyofideas.org.uk/letters](http://academyofideas.org.uk/letters)



ISBN 978-1-7384164-0-0

