

Smoking and Sodomy: Testing the limits of political correctness

Glenn Peoples

Imagine – you’re watching CSI on a Sunday evening, and the first commercial break comes on. This is what you hear: “You’re a disgusting, dirty, revolting *faggot*, and your lifestyle is unwholesome, sick, physically dangerous and unwanted. You need to change your life, and we can help you. Call quitline now.”

Wow. What would happen if that actually took place? The response, I am guessing, would be swift, severe, and condemning. The television channel would be swamped with heated – nay – *outraged* complaints of grossly hateful and offensive vitriol. They would, doubtless, have massive penalties slapped on them for broadcasting such inappropriate material. The word on the street would be that the advertisement was “judgemental,” “homophobic,” “bigoted” and so forth. But that’s not all. In the weeks that ensue, it is made known that the New Zealand Government helped to fund these advertisements with taxpayer money. What a coup! What a scandal! How dare they! We would rest assured that *they* would have just lost one heck of a lot of votes.

Consider another possible scenario in New Zealand. A cluster of advertisements, all created by the same organisation that contained messages like “smoking is dangerous,” “smoking is disgusting,” “people who smoke are just dicks,” “men who smoke are weak, weak, weak,” and “it’s time to quit.” Imagine that in this scenario, the viewer was presented with graphic images of smoke damaged lungs, with disturbing descriptions of what happens to people who get throat or lung cancer, with descriptions of people getting their tongues surgically removed because of the effects of smoking. Imagine that anyone who did smoke was slapped with massive financial penalties. Imagine that when they bought cigarettes, they had to pay around 500% “tobacco tax” on them, and that at least half of this money was simply going into government coffers, instead of actually being used to treat smoking related illness. And just to make it interesting, imagine that the government helped

to fund all that confrontational advertising. And now stop imagining. Any New Zealander reading this has already realised that this is no hypothetical scenario, it's exactly what happens right here.

I'm no fan of smoking. I can't stand it. I would never do it, and I would advise anyone who would listen to me not to do it either. But I am even less a fan of enforced political correctness and double standards.

Here's the challenge I want to consider: Why is it acceptable to use taxpayer dollars to rake smokers over the coals, to insult them (yes, all those quotes are genuinely quoted from anti-smoking advertisements in New Zealand), to call them sick and unhealthy, to assert that their lifestyle is undesired, and to tell them they ought to quit, while it would be unacceptable to do the same to those men who engage in sexual acts with one another, or to put it rather archaically, sodomy (I realise the term offends a lot of people, but I deliberately use it throughout this article just because it is offensive in order to make the point about offending a particular group of people)? Why can't we stigmatise them? For the sake of clarity, I'm not asking for permission to do so, since I have no intention of doing so. All I'm doing is comparing the two cases, and arguing that political correctness has so infiltrated our media that we often just don't see the double standard.

Judging the lifestyles of others

The basic objection to socially stigmatising sodomy is that it entails judging the lifestyles of other people, and simply put, a lot of people believe – or at least say that they believe – that in a free society we should not judge the lifestyles of others. What is generally advanced is a theory of morality often called *moral relativism*. Everyone has their own view of what is moral and what is not, and we really have no right imposing our views on other people or judging their actions or lifestyles to be morally wrong. But is that what we really think? On reflection most of us would admit that we do not. We don't think that absolutely *all* behaviour should be tolerated and not judged. We generally agree that Jules Mikus deserved to go to jail (and probably hell) for

sexually assaulting and murdering a six year old schoolgirl (in fact I daresay most of us think he deserved worse).

Likewise, things like wanton dishonesty, slander, unfaithfulness to one's spouse, reckless driving and a whole host of other things, are routinely condemned in our society. I think it is a fair observation that as a general rule we do not think it is unreasonable to judge these things as wrong, and hence despite what some of us might say at times, we actually don't think that *as a universal rule* it is wrong to judge the lifestyles of others.

More relevant to this particular issue of political correctness and the comparison I am making is the fact that anti-smoking ads, with taxpayer support, *do* in fact condemn the lifestyles of a large number of people. If it's not OK to judge the lifestyles of homosexual people, why is it OK to condemn – and to take taxpayers' money to condemn – the lifestyles of people who smoke?

Addiction – it's who I am

"OK, fair enough," you might say, "it's not wrong *per se* to make judgements about the lifestyles of other people. But smoking and sodomy are such completely different cases that you can't compare one to the other." This is where the argument gets interesting. Let's consider some of the reasons that a person might argue that it is acceptable to publicly attack and condemn the lifestyle of the smoker, but not the sodomite.

The first reason for treating the two cases differently, and for defending the use of taxpayer funds in condemning one lifestyle and not the other, is the issue of action vs. orientation. Simply stated, some might argue that smoking is an action, whereas *being gay* is not a choice or an action, but rather an innate orientation; that is, a built-in disposition that a person cannot do anything about. It might be argued that you shouldn't judge people for what they are, even if it's OK to condemn certain *chosen* actions.

But notice two important flaws in this response. Firstly, it's false that the smoker's lifestyle is always a matter of choice, and secondly, it wouldn't matter if it was or not.

As far as the first point is concerned, it is widely known that smoking is addictive. In fact, many packets of cigarettes bear the deterring message: "Warning: Smoking is addictive." In other words, it's simply false to say that everyone who smokes does so as the result of an ongoing choice to do so. In fact, many smokers have attempted, without success, to give up being a smoker; Nicotine is harder to quit than cocaine. So in fact, just like homosexuality according to the objection being addressed here, being a smoker is very much an orientation rather than a choice for many people.

Secondly, it wouldn't matter for the purposes of this article whether smoking is addictive or not. Notice that the response above says that *homosexuality* is an orientation, a built in disposition, and so it is different from smoking, an action. And notice also the title of this article: Smoking and *Sodomy*. I am not comparing the condemnation of the smoker's lifestyle with the condemnation of the homosexual's *orientation*. This would be a case of comparing apples with oranges. I am comparing the condemnation of two kinds of lifestyles – two kinds of action, smoking, and sodomy. The comparison does not concern itself with the question of whether or not sodomy arises in cases where people have a particular sexual orientation (although lets grant that it often does), nor does it concern itself with whether or not the tendency to smoke is an addiction or inherent orientation (although again, let's grant that it often is).

But Isn't it dangerous?

The third reason that might be given for saying that it is acceptable to publicly attack smoking, and use taxpayer funds to condemn it, but that it would be wrong to do the same for sodomy, is that everyone knows that smoking is simply dangerous. It kills so many people that it is justifiable in the interests of public safety to use public (i.e. taxpayer) funds to create advertisements that publicly condemn this hazardous action.

On closer examination, however, this turns out to be another double standard. For now, I have restricted my subject to advertisements that condemn the smoking lifestyle because it is dangerous to those who do it. These advertisements make up the majority of those that attack smoking (condemning the endangerment of *other* people by way of second hand smoke introduces new issues, and I will set those advertisements aside for now). If this reason is such that it means that smoking can be condemned with taxpayer money and Sodomy cannot, then it must be the case that the “sodomite” lifestyle is not as dangerous as the smoker’s lifestyle. But is this true?

In fact, the risks associated with anal sex (referred to here as “sodomy” because of the way it is referred to in some laws, as well as because the word shocks, as does a lot of anti-smoking advertising), are fairly well established, and some of them are fairly serious. The dangers go from small things like anal fissures (small tears in the anus) through to very dangerous things like a perforated colon. Aside from the immediate physical damage that can be done, a lifestyle of engaging in sodomy carries significant risks of disease as well. In fact, anal sex is considered so dangerous for homosexual men by some sectors of the medical profession that the UK Blood Transfusion Service will not accept blood from any man who has ever had sex with another man, even if it was ‘safe sex’ with a condom.¹ The New Zealand Blood Service will not accept blood from any man who has had sex with another man, with or without a condom, in the last ten years.²

¹ *Do Not Give Blood Without Reading This Leaflet*, The UK Blood Transfusion Services, Department of Health, December 1995.

² See the form entitled *Donor Session Record Form*, available online at <http://www.nzblood.co.nz/?t=45>

A man who has engaged in sodomy over any considerable period of time is considerably more likely to suffer numerous serious diseases like gonorrhea or syphilis, than a man who has not, and as early as the mid eighties, a clear pattern emerged in the victims of AIDS, namely, that at least three quarters of them were men who engaged in sodomy, a massively disproportionate number. Depending on which contemporary source one uses and which country is being described, the percentage is anywhere from fifty-five to ninety percent.

Since these claims are uncontested in the medical community, and since this article is not about medical conditions or injuries that follow from sodomy, I won't delve into further detail. The point is, there are serious dangers associated with sodomy, dangers that are statistically demonstrable, just as there are serious, statistically demonstrable dangers associated with smoking. If the mere existence of risks is sufficient to justify vilifying the practice on television and using taxpayer funds to do so, then it is justifiable to do the same to condemn sodomy. But for some reason, the standard here is not applied in the same way to each scenario. Whereas most of us would *still*, I am sure, object to seeing people who practice sodomy being called "weak" or "dicks," or being condemned and urged to change their lifestyle at the taxpayers expense even though good health grounds might be given, for some reason we do not think it is problematic when this is done to people who smoke.

"We're not making it illegal, just discouraging it"

One final appeal might be made in favour of the status quo, where smoking can be ruthlessly attacked with taxpayer money, and sodomy cannot. It might be pointed out that nobody is trying to stop anyone from smoking. If people want to smoke, they are free to do so, because it's not as though the government has made smoking *illegal*, these advertisements are simply discouraging it. But this objection carries no weight at all. Advertisements like the one described at the beginning of this article likewise would not make sodomy illegal. They would simply discourage (rightly or wrongly) it on the grounds that it is immoral and/or unhealthy.

Concluding Thoughts

For some reason we just cannot get the standard to apply equally to all. Every reason for vociferously telling people to stop smoking and for taking taxpayer money to do so could quite conceivably be used to justify doing the same for sodomy. Likewise, every objection for condemning sodomy in this way would serve equally well as an objection against doing this in the case of smoking. Why is there this double standard? The reason is not hard to figure out. We are infected with political correctness. It has become the “done thing” to avoid offending certain groups of people at all costs. Certain racial groups (e.g. blacks), certain religious groups (e.g. Jews), homosexuals, and others, are *taboo*. By contrast, there are certain other groups of people such as smokers, hunters, non-union workers, people who drive big cars, big businesses, religious conservatives and a number of others who are fair game. It is trendy to attack them in one way or another, and nobody will notice or mind if we do so in a clearly biased manner, singling them out in a way that we would never dare single out anyone in the other group.

Remember, I am not saying that taxpayer funds should be used to condemn sodomy. This article is not about the merits of smoking or sodomy. This article has been about political correctness and double standards. Either it is acceptable to condemn people’s lifestyle and take other people’s money to do so, or it is not. If it is acceptable, there is no reason, given the way we treat smokers, that it cannot be done to sodomites. Dispense with the shackles of political correctness and let people go on television and tell sodomites it’s time to quit! If it is not acceptable to do this to sodomites, then let’s apply the standard consistently, and stop arbitrarily discriminating against other people, like those who smoke. Either we have free speech to do it to all, or we should not do it to any. To sit in the middle as we currently do means that we will have unfairly protected classes living amongst us, along with people who must be the scapegoats of political correctness.