

Stubbing Out? Not If I Can Help It

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Musician Joe Jackson fled New York to escape the stringent anti-smoking laws, only to find a similar threat looming in London.

Friday night in the city. I go to a night club party promoted by my friends Mimi and James, whose past parties are legendary. But the crowd is sparse and the mood subdued. The local economy is bad, but that's not the only problem.

For instance, no one is dancing: it's illegal. This venue doesn't have the appropriate expensive, hard-to-obtain licence. We all have stories: the bar that was busted for letting one couple smooch to the jukebox; the Swing dance class that was closed down; even the downtown nightclub that was heavily fined after an evening of Jewish klezmer music when the 70-something crowd was seen swaying.

But what's this crowd of people doing outside the club? Not dancing; they're smoking.

Thanks to a new law, it's illegal to smoke inside. It's also illegal to drink outside. So: smoke between drinks, or leave your drink inside and hope it's still there when you get back. Either way, a whole separate party is developing out on the street. Not a terribly festive party, though. Everyone is snarling about how the current mayor is even worse than the last one, the one who started this business-and-tourist-friendly Disneyfication of the city, driving the creative, "bohemian" element out, even closing down the topless bars.

Non-smokers start trickling outside, too, and Judy the bartender takes her five-minute cigarette break. The ban is supposed to protect her health, but she says she'd rather not have to be a cop enforcing it, thanks very much, and for fewer tips, at that. And every so often, one of the promoters has to run outside to tell the smokers that something important is happening inside. Oh yes, and to remind them to keep the noise down. The club can be fined for that, too.

The city, of course, is New York, the city I fell in love with when it was a boil on the bum of Reagan's America: dirtier, but much more fun. I've mostly based myself there ever since, but this year I came back to live full-time in England. My disillusionment has more to do with President Bush than Mayor Bloomberg, but the last straw - the thing that had me finally packing my bags in utter disgust - was the smoking ban. Imagine my dismay on hearing that the Smoke Police are pushing for a similar ban in Britain.

Such a ban would be a bigger disaster here than it is in New York, Bloomberg's "We love smoke-free NY!" propaganda notwithstanding. Manhattan still has a kind of steely glamour that London may never quite match, but London - for all its problems - is more sociable, and its nightlife these days freer, friendlier, and somehow more grown-up. It's moving in the right direction, too, with the ridiculous licensing laws about to change. Meanwhile, New York is considering closing its bars and clubs earlier - partly to get those pesky crowds of smokers off the streets.

I'm a moderate smoker myself; I enjoy a couple of cigarettes or a cigar with a drink. But

I'm also a health-conscious person and, over the past few years, I've done extensive research into all sides of the smoking issue. I've concluded that smoking is risky, but not as dangerous as zealous officials and anti smoking activists would have us believe. More to the point, I'm convinced (as are many reputable scientists) that the danger of "passive smoking" is pretty much a hoax, with dodgy statistics manipulated and exaggerated with the express intention of stigmatising smokers and scaring the hell out of everyone.

In my own forays into the wacky world of statistics I've discovered that, for instance, you're more likely to die in a bicycle accident, or as a result of being left-handed and using right-handed things, than you are from passive smoking. But health officials routinely bury any evidence they don't like and cook the books. It's all part of a massive, well-funded propaganda campaign to change the public perception of smoking from something pleasurable to something dirty and antisocial. Well, personally, I take exception to being accused of a "filthy habit". Where is the filth, exactly? I am not a filthy person - here, look at my nails!

Apart from statistics, there is common sense, and our own observations are often at odds with the official line. For instance, anti smokers are now telling us that an estimated half of all smokers (they mean longterm, excessive addicts, but they're starting to drop the fine print) will die of the habit.

Now why, with fewer people smoking, more people like me smoking moderately, and everyone having generally healthier habits, has this estimate gone steadily up? Besides, if it were anywhere near true, all of us would know dozens of smoking fatalities. How many have you known? I knew one and, like most such cases, he died aged 74 after smoking heavily since he was 14. In fact, the majority of us will die in our seventies from the same sorts of diseases, whether we smoke or not. We haven't seen whole generations of passive-smoking bar workers dropping like flies, either, even though pubs were once much smokier.

British common sense is something I often missed in the States. Let's face it, the Yanks do have a worrying history of sanctimoniously charging off in wrong directions. Take Prohibition, for instance. Not that alcohol isn't harmful; in fact, it can quite easily be proven to cause more harm than tobacco. Tobacco, though, is a less popular scourge of humanity than booze or burgers, and that's why the anti smokers have focused on it so much over the past couple of decades.

Anti smoking sentiment has become so inflamed in certain parts of America that you have to wonder if there's something darker at work than concern for public health: a lurking need in society to have some minority to beat up on, now that every other minority is off-limits. How else to explain the astonishing rudeness that smokers experience, or restaurants banning smoking at outside tables, or office buildings banishing smokers and then putting up signs saying: No smoking within 9ft of this entrance? You almost expect to see smokers put in the stocks and pelted with garbage.

Is this what we want in Britain? The American approach to controversial issues doesn't always work. America can't seem to cure Los Angeles of its noxious smog, and yet that city is now trying to ban smoking in parks and on beaches. America can't seem to figure out how to stop rampant obesity, or 11,000 gun deaths a year, and yet a former smoker turned tobaccophobe can become mayor of New York and ban smoking in bars. The

American approach doesn't always work in America, for God's sake. And believe it or not, the smoking issue is one on which Britain is actually much more progressive.

The British hospitality industry, with its recently adopted Voluntary Charter, is making great progress in voluntarily giving people more choice and cleaner air. People are realising that modern air-cleaning and ventilation systems can make the air perfectly comfortable for all but the most fanatical smoke-haters. Not good enough, say the anti smokers. But I've been in bars - in Japan, especially, but more recently the excellent new hi-tech smoking areas at Heathrow airport - where scores of people are smoking but where the air quality is noticeably better than it is outside.

When it comes to pubs, in particular, the anti smokers could use a reality check. Even if it's true that only about 30 per cent of Britons smoke, any fool can see that the percentage in the pub is much higher. Moreover, virtually every non-smoker in the pub socialises with smokers and is perfectly happy to do so, as long as the ventilation works properly, the ashtrays get emptied, and the air isn't too smoky. The British pub has always been a bastion of tolerance.

And it's the pub, not the home, that is the last refuge of the smoker. Hasn't anyone noticed a flaw in telling us we shouldn't be smoking in pubs, and not around our partners or, especially, our children, either? You can't take that refuge away from us without actually making tobacco illegal. And Prohibition never really works. Besides, you'd lose £7 billion a year in tobacco tax money.

Britain can lead the world on this issue, with a smoking policy more considerate toward non-smokers than, say, that of Eastern Europe, but more realistic than the extreme prohibitionism of California and New York. Politicians, take note: you can win headlines and popularity with less, not more, restrictive legislation; by being more, not less, reasonable. Isn't that the British way? I certainly hope so. I'd hate to have to pack my bags in disgust all over again.