

# Smoking in France, losing its puff?

March 5 2014, by Angus Mackinnon

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It was banned in restaurants and al fresco eating became all the rage. It was banned in offices, and business started getting done in huddles on the sidewalk.

The French, legend had it, were more likely to give up having affairs than stub out their [smoking habit](#).

Consumption of alcohol has been falling steadily for years. Waistlines are trimmer than anywhere else in the western world and armies of joggers pound the nation's pavements every weekend.

Yet paradoxically one of the most health conscious nations on the planet has long appeared indifferent to the implications of smoking, a habit that kills 200 French people prematurely every day.

Almost uniquely for a developed country, the proportion of adults who regularly smoke actually went up in the three years after a comprehensive ban on smoking in workplaces and other enclosed public spaces was introduced (in 2007).

Passive smoking—at the entrance to the office, in bus and train stations or on the haze-filled terraces of almost every cafe—is as unavoidable in Paris as the piles of 'megots' (butts) that now collect in the gutters as they once did at the base of the capital's zinc-topped bars.

Complain and the likely response will be a Gallic shrug: That is just how things are in France.

## Change on the way?

Or rather, how they were. Finally, it seems, change may be afoot in the land of Gauloises and Gitanes.

Figures published last week by the national drugs watchdog (OFDT) revealed that, in 2013, the number of [cigarettes](#) sold in France fell by 7.6 percent.

Sales of rolling tobacco continue to rise but, at 2.6 percent, more slowly than in recent years.

And for the first time since 2005, the overall value of tobacco sales shrank last year.

One survey put the proportion of adults who smoke every day at around 27 percent, down from over 33 percent in 2010.

Health experts say it is too early to say for sure if a corner has been turned. Survey results vary and the line between regular (daily) and occasional smoking is hard for researchers to assess accurately.

But it does seem that the combined impact of recent price hikes (at a time of economic stagnation) and the phenomenal success of e-cigarettes may be encouraging millions of French "fumeurs" to reassess their relationship with "les clopes" (slang word for cigarettes).

## E-cigarettes take off

E-cigarettes allow users to simulate the experience of smoking while inhaling a vaporised mix of nicotine and flavourings.

They carry health risks of their own and the jury is still out on whether they help people give up smoking for good. But they have really taken off in France and some experts believe they provide a valuable bridge to total abstinence.

Nearly nine million French adults have tried them and between one and two million puff them on a daily basis, according to an OFDT survey.

"Anything that reduces the number of cigarettes smoked is good news," said Professor Bertrand Dautzenberg, a lung specialist who chairs the anti-smoking Office Francais du Tabagisme.

He believes e-cigarettes can be a useful complement to other methods of helping smokers quit such as nicotine inhalers, tablets and patches.

"Many don't like the feeling of having vapour in the throat, but those that do like it, really like it," he said.

## **More price hikes to come?**

After years of ambivalent attitudes and incoherent policies, it seems too that the authorities have finally woken up to the need for radical action if France is to catch up with neighbouring Britain, where fewer than one in five adults now smoke.

A commission of the French Senate last week called for the pace of recent price hikes, which have lifted the cost of a packet of 20 Marlboro, the market leader, to seven euros (nearly \$10), to be accelerated.

If adopted as part of a new national anti-cancer plan due to be announced by the government before the summer, the Senate recommendation would lift the price of that same packet to more than 11 euros (\$15) within five years.

Britain's successful mix of public education campaigns, tax hikes and specialist support for those who want to stop won praise in a report last year by France's state spending watchdog.

In the same report, the Cour des Comptes lambasted successive French administrations for their ineffective policies.

Damningly, the watchdog revealed that, between 2004-11, 2.6 billion euros was spent compensating tobaccoists for an anticipated tax-driven reduction in sales that never happened.

The total was three times the amount spent on anti-[smoking](#) education campaigns over the same period.

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