

BMJ investigation reveals how big tobacco is able to woo parliamentarians

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An investigation by *The BMJ* today asks to what extent is the tobacco industry able to reach out and influence parliamentarians?

It shows that since 2010, 38 MPs—29 Conservatives, eight Labour, and one independent—have accepted over £60,000 worth of tobacco industry hospitality, including tickets to the Chelsea flower show, high profile sporting events and rock concerts.

More than half of these MPs are from constituencies where the number of smoking related deaths exceeds the national average of 289 per 100,000.

There is nothing to stop companies inviting lords and MPs along to the occasional big ticket event—nor is there any suggestion that any peer or MP has failed to register in the relevant Register of Interests details of the hospitality they have received, as is required.

However, the WHO Frame Convention on Tobacco Control, to which the UK is a signatory, states that parties should "interact with the tobacco industry only when and to the extent strictly necessary to enable them to effectively regulate the tobacco industry and [tobacco products](#)".

The investigation points out that when plain packaging was put to an open vote in the House of Commons in March, 20 of the 38 who had accepted industry hospitality voted against the measure.

These findings raise important questions about how far the vested interests of the tobacco industry control the public health agenda, says journalist Jonathan Gornall.

Standardised tobacco packaging was introduced to tackle "one of our most significant public health challenges", as health minister Earl Howe explained at the time. He added that it placed "an enormous strain on the NHS" and was "a significant driver of health inequalities."

Tobacco companies opposed the move. They included Japan Tobacco International (JTI), the third largest tobacco company, whose brands include Camel, Winston, Benson and Hedges and Silk Cut, which has invited MPs to a series of high profile events.

The BMJ investigation shows that JTI has invited MPs to high profile events where tickets can cost up to thousands of pounds. While there is no evidence that these MPs discussed issues about tobacco with their hosts, it is "extraordinary" how MPs find it acceptable to receive such hospitality from the industry, writes Gornall.

For example, in 2014 alone, 10 MPs were entertained by the tobacco industry at the Chelsea Flower Show. MPs have also accepted free tickets to the men's final at Wimbledon, test matches at the Oval, opera at Glyndebourne, and a Paul McCartney concert.

The BMJ contacted the 20 MPs who received hospitality and voted against plain packaging, but only one responded. Stephen Hepburn, the Labour MP for Jarrow, explained that he felt it was appropriate to accept hospitality because of jobs the industry has generated in his constituency.

But Deborah Arnott, chief executive of Action on Smoking and Health, said Hepburn, or any other MP "does not have to accept hospitality in

order to act on behalf of employees in his constituency" and suggested that they instead look at the number of people dying every year compared with the number of jobs.

Jarrow has the second worst incidence of lung disease and [smoking related deaths](#) among the 37 constituencies whose MPs accepted tobacco hospitality, notes Gornall.

A spokesperson for JTI defended the entertaining of MPs as a "democratic [and] transparent" way of balancing the debate about tobacco.

A second article also published today explains how [public health](#) campaigners are taking the Dutch government to court for breaching the World Health Organization's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control.

The Dutch Youth Smoking Prevention Foundation is an organisation that aims to prevent or stop smoking among children. It claims to have information showing that the government holds regular meetings with the [tobacco industry](#), consulting on policy issues and inviting industry to comment on draft laws and regulations.

More information: Tickets to Glyndebourne or the Oval? Big tobacco's bid to woo parliamentarians, The *BMJ*, www.bmj.com/cgi/doi/10.1136/bmj.h2509

Dutch government on trial for violating international tobacco treaty, The *BMJ*, www.bmj.com/cgi/doi/10.1136/bmj.h2519

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