

Campaign hopes for Tasmanian tobacco-free generation law

19 March 2015

International campaigners for a ban on tobacco sales to anyone born after 2000 say they are hopeful a bill will soon be adopted by parliament in Australia's island state of Tasmania.

Under the legislative proposals, Tasmania would then lift the age at which people can legally buy cigarettes—currently 18—a year at a time to achieve a "tobacco-free generation".

"Tuesday is the vote in the legislative council (upper house) of the Tasmanian parliament... I'm certainly hopeful," Jon Berrick, a professor at Yale-NUS College in Singapore who launched the initiative a decade ago, told an anti-tobacco conference in Abu Dhabi.

The Liberal government dominates the lower house which would in the coming months have to debate and pass the bill. The ban would come into force in 2018.

In the Tasmanian city of Launceston, independent MP Ivan Dean, who is bringing the private member's bill, told AFP however that the outcome was uncertain with no guarantee it would even get to the initial vote.

"It's all up in the air," he said, adding that the vote may be deferred. "There's been a lot of interest but we have to get over this first hurdle on Tuesday."

The proposal does not aim to penalise smokers but targets suppliers.

"It will stop the commercial supply of tobacco to people born this century," Berrick said.

Adrian Reynolds, president-elect of the addiction medicine chapter at the Royal Australian College of Physicians, said he believed the bill would be passed by Tasmania's upper house, but may go no further.

"We are unsure right now whether there is sufficient support for it to be passed in the lower house and then ultimately as legislation," he told AFP.

But he vowed to press on with the campaign, describing the proposal as "the next breakthrough in addressing the uptake of smoking among young people".

The bill "will change social norms" and dramatically reduce access to tobacco, said Reynolds.

He predicted that adoption of the proposal in Tasmania would prompt similar moves worldwide.

Legislators received briefings against the ban from retailers and global conglomerate Imperial Tobacco at parliament on Tuesday.

Imperial Tobacco's Australian head of corporate and legal affairs, Andrew Gregson, said Dean's bill was unenforceable.

He suggested it would lead to young people buying tobacco online or on the black market.

"It will merely shift tobacco demand and supply onto other channels," Gregson said.

"It's Tasmanian businesses and Tasmanian jobs that will suffer as a result, and people will still be able to obtain tobacco."

With nearly one third of 18-24-year-old Tasmanians smoking, the Cancer Council of Tasmania and the state branch of the Australian Medical Association are supporting the bill.

Australia's federal government introduced plain packaging on cigarettes in 2011 in a world first bid to curb smoking rates.

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