



Editorial: Hear the tobacco firms squeal

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OPINION: A useful indicator of the effectiveness of anti-smoking measures is the volume of tobacco company squealing.

The more noise they make, the more they are feeling the pinch. On that basis, the Australian Government's plan to force them to sell their products in plain, brand-less packaging is a roaring success.

Philip Morris, the manufacturer of Marlboro, Alpine and Long Beach cigarettes, has served notice of its intention to use an obscure clause in a little-known bilateral investment treaty with Hong Kong to sue the Australian Government for loss of business. It estimates the claim could amount to billions of dollars. Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard has responded by saying she is not going to be intimidated by "big tobacco's tactics".

Good for her. The New Zealand Government should follow suit. As the Maori Affairs select committee reported last year: **"Tobacco is an addictive and hazardous product which, if used as recommended by the manufacturer, results in the premature death of half of its long-term users."**

Other products such as alcohol and motor vehicles also cause widespread death and misery but only when misused. Tobacco, in contrast, cannot be used safely.

If the removal of tasteful colours and stylised brand names reduces the allure of cigarettes to customers, particularly the young, then they should be removed.

Every person deterred from smoking represents a potential life saved and a saving to the health system.

According to the Maori Affairs committee, which last year recommended sweeping new measures to make New Zealand smokefree by 2025, tobacco kills about 5000 people annually, and is the greatest preventable cause of death and illness in New Zealand.

Even Philip Morris concedes there is no such thing as a safe cigarette.

To quote from the website of its American division: "Philip Morris USA agrees with the overwhelming medical and scientific consensus that cigarette smoking causes lung cancer, heart disease, emphysema and other serious disease in smokers."

Faced with such an admission, governments have a responsibility to discourage an immoral trade.

Threats of legal action should not deter them. Investment treaties can be renegotiated. Tobacco's victims cannot be restored to good health.

Governments should not allow themselves to be held to ransom by the manufacturers of products that do no good and immense harm.

On another level, Philip Morris' legal threats serve as a warning to those involved in the negotiation of international trade and investment agreements. Keep a close eye on the fine print.

There is much to be gained from removing barriers to trade and investment, but the right to make decisions that are genuinely in the public interest should not be traded away.

