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## To Whom It May Concern

I am not sure whether I am sending this to the right department, and I have never done this before so please bear with me.

I would like to lodge a submission into the bullying, discrimination and financial abusing of many Australian citizens by their own government. We are people who are categorised as second-class citizens. We are people who are being forced to live a life in a manner which is unacceptable to ourselves. We are people who pay more taxes than anyone else, and now we are people who are being made to feel ashamed about who we are.

We are smokers. Not even talking about cannabis (which is shamefully still illegal), but tobacco. Everybody in this country is supposed to promote tolerance and acceptance, and most people are accepted for their choices and for who they are. All but us. As a woman I get very offended when I see a man dressing like us, but I have to accept this even though I don't agree. I have to accept people's right to live their lives as they choose and for how they 'identify', but we do not get accepted. Smoking IS our identity and our way of life, yet we are taxed until all our hard-earned money goes back to the government. We are a big, fat cash cow which the government legally steals from. We are forced to live a sub-standard life, and government even encourages the rest of the population to hate us even though we are doing nothing wrong. To us, life is about quality not quantity. Should it not be our choice to decide whether to accept the over-exaggerated risks that the anti-smoking propaganda warns us about? If it were true that smokers have a shorter life span than non-smokers, shouldn't the government be happy that we won't be collecting our pensions for as long as others? If we die early, isn't that infinitely better than paying us our well-deserved age pension? Smoking relieves anxiety and stress all without doping the user. The smoker can still drive, work and function as a useful member of society, unlike somebody who is drunk, high or doped on pharmaceuticals.

Tobacco is a natural plant and does not deserve the harsh reputation it receives. Everybody has a vice, or something they like to indulge in, just like everybody has a habit which annoys somebody else, yet they don't get demonised for it or taxed to poverty. For example, I find the stench of cheap perfume intolerable, yet I can't tax people for the brand they use or force them to stand outside of the pub while I enjoy my beer inside. As for the harm factor, the pollution from cars, trucks, buses, factories etc far outweigh anything a cigarette emits. Many of us were smokers long before any taxes or regulations came into play, and it is not fair or right that we should be forced to give all our money to the government simply for enjoying that which we have always enjoyed.

Us smokers have been forced into hiding. Because of the high taxes, many smokers are forced to have dealings with shady characters in an attempt to procure black market smokes or chop chop. This is potentially dangerous, not to mention illegal. The general population has been brain-washed against us, and I seriously doubt that the statistics from which the demonisation of smoking is based on is accurate. The reason I say this is simple. I speak from personal experience. My doctor's records have me listed as a smoker, therefore every ailment I might have is automatically blamed on smoking. One year when the flu was particularly bad in our area, I went to the doctor. The waiting room was jammed with people who appeared to have the same cold as me. The doctor had the cheek to tell me that my particular cold was bad because I smoke. Hmm. I asked whether everybody else in the waiting room smoked too? I was actually in better condition than most of the people waiting. So you see, EVERYTHING is blamed on smoking. A smoker could enter a doctor's office having his leg bitten off due to a shark attack, and I guarantee that the doctor will find some way to

blame cigarettes. Perhaps sharks prefer the smoky taste of smokers? I question many diagnoses that list smoking as a cause of any particular ailment, including lung cancer. In order to list smoking as a sole cause of cancer, the patient must have every aspect of their lives scrutinised and analysed beginning from when they were in the womb, and have genetic studies done as well to prove that the cancer wasn't hereditary. Then the same tests need to be done to every non-smoker who has the same cancer, because how do you explain the amount of non-smokers who suffer the same ailments as a smoker? How about showing evidence that only smokers get kidney, bladder, lung cancer or gangrene etc that the statements on cigarette packets so boldly claim? A relative of mine died from lung cancer many years ago even though he never smoked. But he did work in a dirty factory for many years while he was young. If anything, it was his work that caused his cancer. If the sickness/cancer cannot be one hundred per cent proven to be caused solely by tobacco, then the taxes couldn't be justified. I realise that there are many 'studies' out there, but how in depth are they really? How accurate?

Anyway, the reason I am writing this is because the taxes need to be removed from cigarettes. It is unjustified, unconstitutional and penalises and persecutes people who have a right to live life the way they choose. There are a few members of the general public now who believe that they have the right to pick on and/or bully a smoker due to the government's anti-smoking agenda, and that is not right. Nobody has the right to bully somebody else. Why not bring back smoking and non-smoking areas? Or allow businesses to make their own decisions on whether smoking is to be allowed in their premises or not? A non-smoker can have their side of the pub or pavement, and we'll have ours. Did you know that my car window got smashed a while ago because I left my packet of cigarettes on the dashboard? I am angry with myself. Usually I take them with me but this time I was in a hurry and forgot. The smokes were stolen, nothing else. I sarcastically thank the government for making cigarettes worth more than gold, so much so that some desperate soul had to resort to breaking into my car in order to steal a pack.

And another thing, there seems to be this misconception that smokers cost everyone else money. Newsflash, we are not all dole-bludgers. Most of us are working-class people. Working-class people work and smoke, which means we already pay enough taxes as it is – income tax, gst on EVERYTHING, car regos, rates, taxes on super, petrol etc etc – the list seems neverending. Contrary to government statistics, the average working-class person does NOT earn \$100k+ per year. We are on much less and the government takes most of what we earn already.

Enough is enough. If working people cannot choose to relax after a hard day's work with a smoke, then life isn't worth living. Might as well go on a disability pension for depression, like so many others do. Yes, it is that disheartening. The government is taking away our quality of life, and for what? Government is supposed to work for us, not be our overlords and interfere in every aspect of our personal lives. Many smokers no longer admit that they smoke because they've been made to feel ashamed, but they still do.

Let's move on to the health system. Firstly, the extreme, outrageous taxes do not reflect the costs. It appears that we smokers are now paying for the entire country's healthcare. Why? Not every smoker even uses public healthcare but are in private health funds – why should they cop the taxes? Medicare is supposed to be there for all, regardless of lifestyle choice. If we start discriminating against certain people's choices, it won't be long before the whole system falls apart (perhaps that's what government is aiming for?!). Why should any of us pay for people who suffer ailments which we ourselves do not have or approve of? People who need treatments for heart attacks or diabetes caused by obesity? People who collect disability and contribute nothing to society because they are depressed? People who need on-going physio, treatment and surgeries because they play sports? People who drink or take extreme drugs? See what I'm getting at? Why should smokers be the only ones who are so heavily discriminated against? Why should we be the only ones to wear the costs?

Oh, and if you're worried about young people taking up smoking, don't worry, I hear they have found other things to smoke. Apparently meth is much better and more widely accepted nowadays. I've also heard that many sporting clubs are in dire need of financial aid – maybe if cigarette companies were allowed to endorse teams again there wouldn't be these problems. Food for thought.

Now for something personal: My husband and I both smoke, and yes, I married him partly because he DOES smoke, because I wasn't going to spend the rest of my life living with a non-smoker. It's something we have in common and aids us in maintaining a peaceful marriage. Now we are both under severe financial duress and it's all the government's fault. We weren't hurting anybody. We already don't go out but spend most of our free time at home because we are forced to. No money to go out, and not welcome anywhere.

My mother passed away last year from breast cancer, which she battled for over 2 decades. She was a heavy smoker and was hospitalised for the most part towards the end. The last 3 months of my mother's life were filled with harassment and bullying by a small handful of self-righteous health staff, including some nurses and one particularly nasty paramedic who lectured my mother on smoking on the day she was dying and had to be picked up by ambulance. Now I understand why some paramedics are experiencing violence, it is not their place to make judgements on people they know nothing about. During my mother's final months, I asked her doctor whether her quitting cigarettes now will prolong her life? The answer was no. Her cancer too, was NOT caused by smoking. At the end her breast cancer had spread everywhere, and there was no more treatment available. She had to endure being treated worse than a leper by being forced outside in windy, cold, rainy conditions while in a wheelchair simply to have a cigarette. She had to beg nurses to wheel her outside. Smoking is all she had left that gave her any pleasure in the end. I guarantee that my mother's chest infection was caused by having no undercover area in which to smoke. My mother had trouble walking and bending at the end, she dropped her packet of cigarettes one day at the hospital and one horrible nurse refused to pick them up for her, saying that 'Oh well, you shouldn't smoke anyway'. This is no way to treat our elderly, or anyone for that matter. Another time my husband had dealings with a nurse, she was morbidly obese and looked to have weighed in excess of 120kg. She snarkily told my husband to stop smoking. He replied in kind, saying that she needed to stop eating. She got offended and we needed a new nurse. Hear that: SHE got offended even though she offended him first. See the divisiveness and discrimination that we smokers have to endure?

I heard Scott Morrison talking during Parliament Question Time about 'protecting freedom and liberty' and also that 'one group shouldn't pay higher taxes than another' – well, we are that one group. When you live in a free country, you sometimes need to tolerate things which you personally may not like or agree with. That is the price of freedom. What is the point of living if you cannot live your life as you choose? We only have one life. Smoking is a part of my identity and who I am. MY LIFE. NOT YOURS. Maybe I don't want to live to be 100+, maybe I am quite content with a shorter life (if that is indeed what I will have) in order to have lived it the way I chose. Unfortunately, the so-called 'freedom' in this country only applies to 'desirable' members of society. You can't have it both ways. You can't say 'yes, I want to live in a free country but only if everyone behaves in a way which suits me'. Smokers are not criminals, yet we are being treated as such and are being fined on a daily basis simply for enjoying our lives in a manner different to others. My quality of life has declined due to the high taxes and now I'm depressed and angry all the time. The blame lies with government. There are many of us who feel the same. What are smokers supposed to do since we cannot and will not sacrifice our way of life:

1. Commit suicide?
2. Turn to crime?

3. Immigrate to a friendlier country?

4. Pursue legal action?

It seems like these are the only options open to us. Australia is the most expensive country in the world to smoke, and unless you're a professional like a doctor or a lawyer, it is difficult to immigrate to another country. They don't want working-class people, and our government doesn't want smokers.

Please, for the love of god, remove the outrageous taxes. Stop harassing, intimidating, bullying, financially abusing and persecuting hard-working, honest citizens who have a right to live their lives the way they choose.

Regards

Verena Anderson