

National Affairs by Claire Hoy ? Smokers the ones to be blamed

First a confession: I have never smoked. Ever.

For as long as I can remember, I've always viewed it as a stupid, stinky habit that couldn't possibly be doing your health any good. Indeed, since the mid-1950s, when the U.S. Public Health Service publicly warned people that the link between puffing cigarettes and dying of cancer wasn't exactly a coincidence, few things have been more widely publicized than the evils of smoking. Think about it. Could a person born and raised in the last 50 years or so really not understand that smoking is bad for your health? I mean, really?

And yet ? incredibly ? a Quebec judge recently ruled that more than one million Quebec smokers didn't know their habit was unhealthy. Why? Because, says the judge, the big bad evil cigarette companies hid the news from them. Hid the news? Are they nuts? You can't buy a pack of smokes without being confronted by grisly pictures covering most of the pack showing the ugly results on the body. Barely a week goes by when some group somewhere passes another rule and/or regulation making it more difficult for puffers to engage in their stupid habit.

The anti-smoking message is everywhere. You can't possibly escape it.

And yet ? yet ? Quebec Superior Court Judge Brian Riordan has ruled that Big Tobacco has to pay big time for the damage they've inflicted upon the legion of unsuspecting ? and apparently colossally stupid ? Quebec smokers who, unlike smokers the world over, have been hoodwinked by the tobacco companies and have no responsibility ? none whatsoever ? for their own idiocy.

The four big tobacco companies in Quebec ? Imperial Tobacco, Rothmans, Benson & Hedges and JTI-Macdonald ? have been ordered to pay \$15 billion to the plaintiffs in the class action suit in compensatory and punitive damages.

To get in on the gravy train, smokers must have consumed the equivalent of about a pack a day for 12 years prior to 1998, close to 90,000 cigarettes in all, apparently smoked without any personal knowledge of the dangers they were inflicting upon themselves. Er, didn't mean to put it that way. That implies some personal responsibility here, a concept that is getting more and more distant in the current age. No sir. They didn't choose to smoke, Big Tobacco tricked them. As a result, Big Tobacco must pay for the harm their deceit has caused.

The ruling is so totally absurd ? and the reasoning behind it so demonstrably false ? that one can only hope the tobacco companies will appeal to a more sane court.

Even if they do appeal ? just to show you how out of whack this ruling is ? the companies have been ordered to ante up \$1 billion within 60 days.

Now, I understand it's fashionable to blame Big Tobacco, Big Oil and Big Business generally, for all the ills of society. And no doubt they are responsible for some of them. But then too so is Big Government, Big Unions and a host of other ?bigs? ranging from environmental to animal zealots and pretty much everything else.

But the notion that somebody in the past few decades can actually light up a cigarette with no knowledge whatsoever of the dangers of the weed is just simply untenable.

Oh yes, many say they can't quit and they blame Big Tobacco for that. After all, they put addictive stuff in their smokes. Of course they do. Duh! Yet millions of former smokers have managed to break the habit ? some of whom, if they live in Quebec, may be wondering if they quit too soon and will miss out on the gravy train.

People do all sorts of things they shouldn't do. I eat too much. Should I sue the farmers or Big Agriculture? Apparently. Can't possibly be my fault if I don't push my chair away from the table after the first course. Gotta blame somebody. Sure beats taking responsibility for your own actions and hey, if you can cash in some chips over it, all the better, eh?

I don't know why people are still smoking. Fewer are, but there are still a lot of people picking up the habit every year and a lot of people sticking with it despite the indisputable evidence of the harm it does to their bodies.

But in my world, that's on them. They are to blame.

Period. End of story.

