

Shurely shome mishtake?
by *Sung Ho Cheung, Foreign Correspondent*

It's Time for Change...

Yes it is. And not before time too! I'm curious, and what I am alluding to is the need for a refocusing of attention towards one of society's greatest threats ... no, it's not cigars nor is it crack, heroin, speed, amphetamines, marijuana (least of all) or any other such thing, what I am referring to is a far more insidious cocktail i.e. alcohol.

I know for a fact that the anti-cigar brigade, some of whom may well be members of the anti-everything horde, read these and other such columns about cigars with as much passion as do we lovers of the leaf. For are we not open about our harmless passion, and visible - and by being such, we do provide an easy target for their (often) well-intentioned (QED) antics in trying to save us from ourselves and our love of cigars - for the most part at least ... although there are too many amongst that group who have a hidden agenda; and they themselves never ever come under attack - well, certainly not from right-minded and gentle folk (for the most part) like us.

Now, what I would like them to do is take on a much bolder initiative and leave us cigar lovers alone to enjoy our harmless pleasures in peace and take up the fight against the purveyors of BOOZE in all its many and glamorous forms. This could mean giving up a few gut *Buds* or mixing it with *Jack*, or maybe forgoing the pleasure of the company of *J. Arthur* himself. Not such a bad thing, methinks? And so what if we have no opportunity to imbibe an Opus - no matter how X-ellent or whomsoever lays claim to have been the original creator of a greater magnum. Bacchus, you anti-warriors in this campaign ... we need your unwavering (*hic*) support.

In this (proposed) campaign, the unity of ordinary people who are sick and tired of the injustice of unfair taxes being applied e.g. to cigar purveyors / smokers etc.; and more importantly - the burden of overtaxing scant health resources -- which are most needed for those at the bottom of the food chain who are least likely to be unable to afford them, and are also prime targets for the bootleggers and gin houses -- being abused and overused through ill effects of alcohol abuse / misuse; and the lives that are lost and damaged as a result of such. Just imagine... ordinary people coming together in concert with the insurance industry,

the forces of law and order, the medical services, the auto industry etc. all to serve but one common purpose: to hi-light the true and unglamorous dangers of alcohol and realise it is time for change ... and to effect change. DV

It could happen ... and you never know, it might just surprise us all.

Now then, to get started ... the arguments we often hear from the booze peddlers against any threat to their business or income is often countered and supported the length of the bar in this way:

Alcohol

- Alcohol is a legal product
- Alcohol is not sold to underage consumers
- Alcohol has not been proven a major cause of illness
- Used responsibly, alcohol can effect a feeling of well being
- Alcohol advertising has not been proved to induce new consumer take-up
- Alcohol sponsorship supports a vast range of cultural and sports events
- Alcohol usage in a social setting is part of our civilised behaviour
- Alcohol taxes and revenues increase local / federal / government coffers considerably and are a major sauce (*hic*) of irreplaceable revenue
- Alcohol usage in the home is every person's right to enjoy a legal product in the privacy of his/her own home without fear or discrimination. An inalienable right.

OK, that's about as average as the list of replies would get; though I am sure there are a whole lot more – but I'm sure y'all get the drift. Now, let's see what happens when we present the same case in favour of cigars...

Cigars

- ✓ Cigars are a legal product
- ✓ Cigars are not sold to underage consumers
- ✓ Cigars have not been linked with or proven to be a any major cause of illness
- ✓ Used responsibly, cigars can effect a feeling of well being

- ✓ Cigar advertising has not been proved to induce new / underage consumer take-up
- ✓ Cigar sponsorship supports a selected range of cultural and sports events, though not too many
- ✓ Cigar usage in a social setting is part of our civilised behaviour
- ✓ Cigar taxes and revenues increase local / federal / government coffers considerably and are a major source (of vehement debate in many US states) of easily replaceable revenue e.g. cigarette taxes
- ✓ Cigar usage in the home is every person's right to enjoy a legal product in the privacy of his/her own home without fear or discrimination. An inalienable right.

Well, what do you think? To me, it seems as clear as day. The lobbyists (supported by) the alcohol manufacturers / providers (QED) are so well organised that they have managed to cloud every right-thinking person's image to the reality of the threat of alcohol and its misuse, and the dire and tragic consequences of this mighty evil. And no matter who you are, or how strong you may think you are – every one of us is susceptible to this great evil. Remember that!

Consider this...

- How often is it reported in the news about a a cigar smoker who may have overindulged and smoked maybe two or three cigars a night who has ended up driving through a red traffic light and caused a traffic accident resulting in loss of life to innocent pedestrians or other road users?
- How many Emergency Medical Centres are filled with cigar smokers who are threatening to shoot / rob / kill after taking one too many puffs?
- How many murders are committed by cigar smokers who lost control of their senses whilst indulging in this simple pastime?
- How many families have lost a parent / brother / sister - whose lives have been destroyed and in turn, ruined the lives of those dependent upon their income-providing role and general wellbeing to the effects of smoking a cigar or two?
- How much valuable court time is taken up with irresponsible cigar smokers ... whose only crime was to smoke a cigar?
- How many criminals have got away with murder (literally) by claiming to 'have lost control' through cigar misuse/abuse?

- How many tragic cases of suicide are as a direct result of taking too many cigars after lunch?
- How many careers / lives are lost or irreparably damaged due to smoking a cigar?
- How many cigar lovers trash hotel rooms or wreck their own home because they had a couple too many cigars?
- How many people lose their sense of fidelity and wreck their marriage / relationship and risk all - by taking a few cigars too many?
- How many times do you see a cigar smokers behaving in a raucous manner in public, being abusive, threatening, aggressive or indeed - vomiting all over the place?
- How many times do you see a cigar smoker living a life on the street – at the very end of his/her tether?
- How many children / other lunatics run amok in schools under the influence of a cigar?
- And so one...

The answers to the above questions are of course (hardly) ‘none’. With tragedies occurring every day all over our fracturing planet e.g. Kosovo - *- and please, let’s remember all unjustly treated individuals (including Anwar Ibrahim, Nobel Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, the Dalai Lama and the people of Tibet, the People of Eire and their 700 years of unjust suffering, Mother Earth and of course, all those trapped by and suffering from the effects of alcohol and/or substance abuse/misuse etc) wherever they may be in our prayers --* it makes one wonder why so much fierce attention is directed towards this utterly simple pleasure of burning a few rolled-up tobacco leaves in the privacy of our own home/office. Recently, I read of a case in USA (where else?) of people in an apartment block who took their downstairs neighbour to court because they could occasionally smell cigar tobacco smoke on the odd occasion this poor fellow fancied a puff. I mean, how utterly preposterous!!

In Hong Kong, we are nowhere near that sort of intolerance, yet. But a nice cloud of aromatic smoke simply pales into insignificance when compared to the general state of the air quality here. For example, if I look out of my office window I can see the harbour – what’s left of it. Well, that actually depends on the air pollution levels. Some days, I can see none of it, some days I can see a few hundred yards only and on others (when there’s a strong wind), I can see much further ... but not as far as one could see - say five or more years ago. Yet, we have fleets of buses, countless trucks and vans, cars and a gazillion taxis - belting out

great black clouds of noxious fumes each and every day. And the people here cry out for change ... yet, all we hear are the usual empty promises for action, obfuscation and prevarication trundled out by the authorities – par for the course in most places where democracy (huh?) reigns ... and we do suffer - along with our children (including mine) with a growing and more persistent number of chest ailments. We in Hong Kong can't understand why they don't listen and take some positive action? But that's another story...

Back to cigars ... you may recall that in a previous article (Jan '99), I suggested that cigars be treated as a sub-grouping under the tobacco crop (of taxes) to reflect more clearly, fairly and judiciously our little pleasure – so that we responsible citizens who are happy to pay our portion of (fair) taxes are not burdened with the hefty penalties (and evils commonly) associated with cigarettes. Check it out.

Just imagine ... if all those who have suffered or are suffering due to their consumption of alcohol products decided to get together and form a *class action* against the alcohol producers in a similar way in which those people who - with the support of the US States Attorneys General – took their case all the way to the top ... and were successful. I reckon I can hear the champagne corks a-poppin' right now in every law firm and ambulance chaser's office throughout the length and breadth of the land at the very thought of it. Mind you, I bet Jack Daniel's and others of his ilk are turning in their corporate graves right now at the very notion.

Now, having said all that – I enjoy a glass or three like any other normal Irish person ... my argument is not to cork the bottle, simply to put the genie back in the bottle and ask that the anti-*whatever* brigade now focus their furore and most serious attention to the alcohol industry and give it as good a thrashing as they have to the cigar industry, without fear or favour. And try to effect a change that will be universally welcomed and popularly supported, and be seen as good for society in general. That's it. And just before I reach my closing time, remember these words of wisdom - *in vino veritas*. Cheers!