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**TITLE: Inconsistency a constant when it pays to advertise**

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Why is it that simple questions so rarely have simple answers? For example, does advertising work or not?

Consider the debate about whether we should force tobacco companies to use plain packaging for cigarettes.

On the one hand, the Gillard Government obviously believes such an approach will be effective.

So to, it seems, do a number of Liberal MPs with medical training.

Opposition Leader Tony Abbott on the other hand, despite having supported tougher labelling to tell us how damaging cigarettes are to our health, doesn't support the removal of branding designed to tell smokers how prestigious, masculine or "cool" the cigarettes are.

Maybe he believes that negative messages work and positive messages don't? Or maybe he thinks that allowing a mixed message to go out means he is getting the balance right?

But Tony Abbott is not alone in being confused in his views on advertising.

While the Gillard Government is taking a hard line on the issue of cigarette labelling it joined with the Coalition in voting down the Greens' private member's bill calling for a ban on junk food advertising during children's viewing hours.

Perhaps the Government believes that while adults can be easily influenced by labels, children are far more sophisticated when it comes to seeing through the way the "sugar in a box for breakfast" companies use cartoon animation and elite athletes to persuade them.

Or perhaps the Government just doesn't think that the epidemic of childhood obesity and diabetes is as significant as the dangers of smoking.

One of the more perplexing examples in relation to advertising, however, is at Canberra Airport. It is the only airport in Australia where travellers can regularly see advertisements for helicopters and warships. Why?

Could it be that the weapons industry is so naive as to think that something as simple as a picture of a helicopter looking like it is in a hurry to do something important could possibly influence the decision-making process of the Australian defence force? Of course not.

Maybe they just put the ads there to remind the defence decision-makers that they are pitching for billions of dollars worth of projects because they have so little faith in the procurement process that they fear that without such ads their tender documents might be misplaced?

Or maybe the weapons manufacturers just waste hundreds of millions of dollars per year on advertising because, like the tobacco industry and the sugar in a box companies, they don't really believe the ads work but they just like to spend the money?

While we might not ever be able to agree on whether advertising works or not, or why it is that companies who say it doesn't are so determined to spend a fortune doing it, it is easy to answer a slightly different question: do politicians think advertising works?

Based on the way they conduct election campaigns, the answer is a definite "yes". The first thing a political party thinks about when it comes to changing people's minds about who to vote for is the advertisements it wants to run. And the next thing they think of is where they can find the money to run them.

As luck would have it, some of the industries that are the most eager to advertise their own products are also among the industries that are most willing to donate to political parties to ensure that they too can advertise themselves.

Tobacco companies have donated more than \$200,000 to Tony Abbott's party since 2007, the pharmaceutical industry has donated more than \$600,000 to the major parties and the alcohol industry threw another \$100,000 into the pot.

Either advertising works or it is an incredible waste of money that serves to drive up consumer prices and taxes for no good purpose.

If it doesn't work, we would all be better off if it was banned. And if it does work, we need to think very carefully, and hopefully act consistently, in our approach to regulating it.

The companies that want to sell harmful products to vulnerable people increasingly rely on arguments based on the right to free speech. Ironically, not only does Australia's constitution provide no such right, but some politicians who support the advertisers' right to free speech neither supported the call for a charter of rights that could have enshrined such protections in law, nor did they oppose placing a gag order on David Hicks to prevent him from telling his story on his return from Guantanamo Bay.

It might be easy to answer the question of whether politicians think advertising works, but it is impossible to answer the question of why some of them can get away with being so inconsistent.

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