



**OPENING STATEMENT BY FOREST EIREANN TO THE
JOINT COMMITTEE ON HEALTH AND CHILDREN
GENERAL SCHEME OF THE PUBLIC HEALTH
(STANDARDISED PACKAGING OF TOBACCO BILL) 2013
THURSDAY 13 FEBRUARY 2014**

Mr Chairman,

Thank you for inviting me to attend this hearing of the Joint Committee on Health and Children.

My name is John Mallon and I represent the smokers' group Forest Éireann. Forest stands for Freedom Organisation for the Right to Enjoy Smoking Tobacco.

Forest Éireann was set up in 2010. We are supported by Forest UK which was founded in 1979 to represent adults who choose to smoke tobacco, and non-smoking adults who are tolerant of adults who smoke.

Forest UK is supported by British American Tobacco, Imperial Tobacco Limited and Gallaher Limited, part of the Japan International Group of Companies.

Neither Forest UK nor Forest Éireann represent or speak for the tobacco industry. We do not promote smoking or any tobacco product or brand. We have a completely independent set of goals centred on the right to smoke a legal product without undue harassment or discrimination.

As a smoker myself, I am here to offer the perspective of the consumer who chooses to smoke tobacco in full knowledge of the health risks associated with smoking, which are very well documented. I am also here to offer an insight into why people, including children, start smoking.

With regard to today's hearing, we believe the case for standardised packaging of tobacco is based on the fallacy that children are attracted to smoke because of exposure to so-called "colourful" or "glitzy" packaging, and that without branding far fewer children or young people would be tempted to start.

This argument is based not on hard fact but on speculation and conjecture.

There is no credible evidence that standardised packaging will have any effect on youth smoking rates. In my case I started smoking because a friend offered me a cigarette and it became a daily social habit we engaged in and shared secretly together until we turned 18. Forty-four years later we are still friends.

Speaking personally, plain packaging will make no difference to me. I will simply ask for my regular brand of tobacco. I should add, however, that when I am abroad in an EU country I buy local EU duty paid tobacco. This allows me to legally bring home a year's supply. If Ireland adopts a unilateral approach to plain packaging, I imagine that branded packs, purchased abroad, will be popular with many consumers as a symbol of passive rebellion.

I would also point out that the display of tobacco has been banned in Ireland since 2008. Smokers have to ask for their preferred brand before it is handed to them. Normally they will put it directly into their pocket or handbag. When a cigarette packet does see the light of day it is normally in the company of other smokers, outside. I would suggest, therefore, that cigarette packs are already largely invisible to children.

We believe plain packaging is gesture politics. It won't stop children smoking and there are other more important issues the Department of Health should prioritise in 2014.

According to a recent poll by Red C for Forest Éireann, just nine per cent of people surveyed thought standardised packaging is the policy most likely to reduce youth smoking rates in Ireland. In contrast more than half the people surveyed thought health education in schools would be most effective in reducing smoking rates.

Given a list of four issues the Minister of Health should prioritise in 2014, plain packaging ranked last on just 4 per cent. In contrast, 45 per cent wanted the Minister to prioritise the health budget overspend, 32 per cent childhood obesity, and 18 per cent under-age drinking.

The current Minister of Health has made plain packaging of tobacco a personal crusade but only a very small minority think it's the best way to stop children smoking. Even fewer want it to be his number one priority in 2014.

We are concerned that plain, or standardised, packaging represents another step towards a nanny state in which adult consumers are increasingly infantilised by politicians who don't trust us to make decisions for ourselves.

As consumers, we are also concerned about the slippery slope, the idea that once standardised packaging is introduced for tobacco the policy will be adopted for alcohol, convenience foods and other potentially unhealthy products.

We believe the treatment of smokers over the last ten years is setting a dangerous precedent in a democracy because the same tactics can now be applied to the consumers of other products we freely choose to spend our money on.

How long will it be before public health campaigners call for alcohol, fatty food, sugar or even confectionary to be sold in plain packaging?

To conclude, Mr Chairman, we do not want children to smoke. Smoking should be a choice for informed adults only and we support all reasonable measures that prevent or discourage children from purchasing or consuming tobacco.

The proposal to introduce standardised packaging is neither reasonable nor justified. There is no credible evidence to suggest it will work. If government really wants to protect children from smoking it should seek tougher enforcement of existing laws, and focus on further education in schools.

Most important, perhaps, the 2012 report 'State of the Nation's Children', published by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, highlights the fact that it is children in more disadvantaged areas who are most likely to smoke. In our view it would be better for the nation's health if government addressed this issue instead of distractions like plain packaging.

Finally, Mr Chairman, I would like to thank you and your Committee for inviting Forest Eireann to attend this hearing today. We are pleased the Committee has recognised that the consumer is a legitimate stakeholder in this debate, and we look forward to continued discussions in future.

Thank you.