



CANADA

LEAKED BIG TOBACCO DOCUMENT SUGGESTS IT USED CONVENIENCE-STORE, ANTI-CONTRABAND GROUPS AS LOBBYISTS



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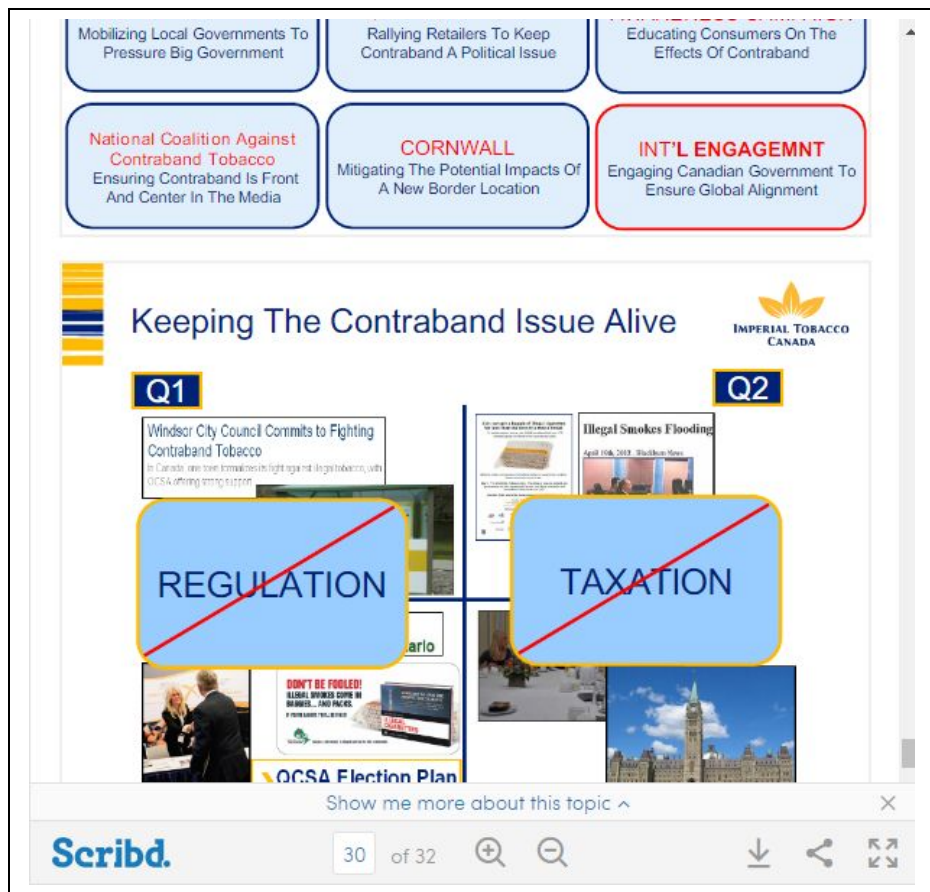
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Across Ontario and Quebec, city and town councils passed a wave of similar resolutions, urging provincial governments to crack down on the scourge of contraband tobacco.

It was no coincidence: the municipalities had all been lobbied by convenience-store and anti-contraband associations.

The same, seemingly independent groups have also called for a freeze on legal tobacco taxes, opposed bans on menthol cigarettes and, today, are fighting the federal government's plan to require plain packaging for smoking products.

But a leaked Imperial Tobacco document suggests that 2012 lobbying campaign was no grassroots movement, and that the retail and contraband organizations have for years been used as surrogates by the cigarette giant to promote its own interests.



The internal PowerPoint presentation describes deploying the convenience-store groups and the National Coalition Against Contraband Tobacco — both at least partly funded by the tobacco industry — to promote fears about contraband, push for action against it and keep taxes down on legal ones.

The document focuses at length on what it calls Project M&M: “Mobilizing municipalities to pressure for Big Government action.”

It then refers to cases where the convenience-store associations or anti-contraband group garnered media coverage and convinced dozens of local councils to pass those resolutions.

One slide in the August 2012 presentation suggests Imperial's tactics worked, noting there had been no increases in tobacco taxes since 2008.

“Our campaigns have delivered some success.”

The document — a presentation made to parent company British American Tobacco — was leaked to a public-health researcher by a company “whistleblower,” said Melodie Tilson of the Non-Smokers’ Rights Association.

“This presentation makes it really clear,” she said. “They are orchestrating various organizations and using them basically as their puppets to ensure governments don’t enact effective tobacco-control measures.”

Groups like the convenience stores mislead the public and elected officials when they fail to make clear their close ties to Big Tobacco — whose

products are one of the biggest sources of chronic disease and death in Canada, said Tilson.

She and other anti-smoking advocates agree that contraband cigarettes — whose cheap prices may be encouraging more smoking — are an important issue.

But they note the groups have not only called for enforcement action against the illicit trade, but opposed tax increases, bans on flavoured cigarettes and even the move to hide tobacco “power walls” in stores.

In fact, there is other evidence of their close links to the industry, including at least three former tobacco-company executives who are now leaders in the Ontario, Quebec and national convenience-store associations.

The CEO of the Ontario group, David Bryans, appears even to have filled both roles simultaneously. A man by the same name was director of domestic sales for what is now JTI-MacDonald in the 1990s — according to an internal organizational chart filed in a Quebec lawsuit — and as recently as 2012 was described in court testimony as a corporate-affairs representative for that firm.

He has led either the Ontario or Canadian convenience-store trade groups since well before then — 2003.

But the current president of the Canadian Convenience Stores Association, Satinder Chera, denied his group acts at the behest of the tobacco industry.

Cigarette companies are among 60 national firms who are part of the association, representing the stores’ major suppliers from soft-drink makers to oil companies, he said.

The association lobbies on a “slew” of issues, and makes no apologies for opposing contraband, said Chera.

“It’s a bit peculiar that some are hanging their hats on this particular PowerPoint presentation, in that it addresses contraband ... which I think all of us should be concerned about.”

Still — like colleagues from his and the other groups at various legislative committee hearings — he refused to disclose what proportion of the association’s funding comes from the tobacco industry.

Jeffrey Guiler, an Imperial Tobacco spokesman, said in a statement that the company works with a variety of groups on a “multitude of issues,” including contraband.

“This criminal activity harms honest small-business owners. They care about their business and we work with their umbrella groups to advocate for their best interests.”

The National Coalition did not respond directly to the suggestion it is part of Imperial's lobbying campaigns, but noted in a statement that its 18 member organizations have convinced governments to act against “this growing (contraband) threat.”

The Imperial Tobacco presentation lists the company, the convenience-store groups and contraband coalition side by side as conducting various campaigns for years to oppose illegal cigarettes and to “freeze taxes.”

Then it asks “how to keep the pressure on” and answers by describing the 2012 Project M&M campaign involving the same players, but leaning on Quebec politicians during an election year and on municipalities in two provinces.

Through such “front groups,” the tobacco company essentially co-opted politicians and other “innocents,” charged Cynthia Callard of Physicians for a Smoke-Free Canada.

“If I was a councillor in any of those municipalities that had passed a resolution in good faith,” she said, “I would feel used.”