Smokefree 2025: patterns and trends in references to the smokefree goal in political speeches and press releases

In March 2011, in response to a recommendation from the Māori Affairs Select Committee,1 the New Zealand Government adopted the goal of achieving a smokefree nation by 2025. Achieving this goal will require robust policies that the tobacco industry and its associates will inevitably contest.2 Politicians from all parties will need to be resolute in the face of industry opposition, and demonstrate their commitment to the Smokefree 2025 goal.

The frequency with which politicians refer to the 2025 goal provides one measure of their commitment to a smokefree nation, and may help assessment of where political support exists and where it may need to be cultivated. Using a novel automated approach, we report on an analysis of political press releases and speeches that examined how the Smokefree 2025 goal featured in New Zealand’s political discourse.

We sourced documents from an archive of communications by government ministers3 and a commercial repository of national press communications.4 We divided communications between April 2010 to December 2013 into eight time periods for analysis: two prior to and six after the Government adopted the Smokefree goal. We extracted text and metadata from each source into a purpose-built database, then used open source software5–8 to develop algorithms for initial text standardisation, extract metadata, and exclude duplicate communications.

To identify documents referring to tobacco control issues, or the Smokefree 2025 goal, we ‘stemmed’ relevant words to their root9 and used key-term matching against these stems (e.g., 'smoke', 'smokefre', 'cigarett', 'tobacco', 'nicotin', '2025'). All documents flagged as potentially relevant were checked manually to exclude false positives.

Wherever possible, we assigned a primary author and political affiliation by calculating an ‘author certainty’ indicator from politicians’ names featured in the documents; this process used rules relating to name position in the document and known party association. Where multiple potential authors were identified, we assigned the first occurring name as primary author. Documents flagged as having low authorship certainty (817, ~4%) were manually examined.

We analysed 20,352 documents with between 2,033 and 2,790 examined in each time period. Out of 384 potentially relevant documents, 254 were confirmed as containing substantive tobacco references, with 68 of those mentioning the smokefree goal. Of these, 251 with a tobacco reference and 68 (all) with a goal reference were attributed to a primary author, and all were attributed to a political party.

Between 18 and 40 (0.9–1.4% of the total) communications mentioned tobacco at least once in each period except February–July 2012 (55, 2.2%). All periods but two contained between three and nine references to the goal. The exceptions were two peaks during the announcement period in March 2011 (13 references) and in Feb–July...
2012 (20), which coincided with several tobacco control policy developments (see Figure 1). Goal references fell to four during the period around the general election in November 2011. Between July 2012 and the end of 2013, goal mentions remained reasonably constant (six to nine), well below the two peaks described above. This pattern was largely mirrored by references to any tobacco control issue.

**Figure 1. Communications referencing tobacco issues and the 2025 goal**

Further analysis revealed that references to the goal were unevenly distributed across politicians and political parties. Speeches or releases from Tariana Turia (Associate Minister of Health with responsibility for tobacco control, Māori Party) accounted for 40 (59%) of the goal references. Ian Lees Galloway (the Labour Party Associate Spokesperson on Health) mentioned the goal four times, Associate Minister of Health Jo Goodhew (National Party) mentioned the goal four times, and Hone Harawira of the Mana Party accounted for three mentions. Health Minister Tony Ryall (National Party) made two references.

Minister Turia (69) and Minister Ryall (50) made more references to tobacco issues than any other politician (all others made fewer than 15 references). Minister Ryall’s tobacco references focussed primarily on government targets and support of smokers in hospital and primary care settings (35 of the 50), but did not link these targets to the 2025 goal.

* Until November 2010 the goal most used was for 2020, and was a non-government goal. From November 2010 to March 2011 it was the Māori Affairs Select Committee goal, not a government goal.
The Māori Party accounted for over a third (35%) of communications mentioning tobacco issues and two-thirds (66%) of communications mentioning the 2025 goal. These figures show a striking commitment to the smokefree goal and tobacco control in general as the Māori Party currently holds 3 seats in the 121-seat parliament. By contrast, Labour (34 seats), accounted for 13% of the tobacco and 10% of goal references and the Mana Party (1 seat) accounted for 6% of tobacco and 4% of goal references. The governing National Party (59 seats) accounted for 32% of tobacco and 13% of goal references.

There are some limitations to our analyses. For example, the data were skewed toward Government (National Party and Māori Party) communications, since one source was ministerial documents. Also, some parties or individual politicians (e.g., backbench or opposition members) depositing communications in the commercial repository may have been underrepresented if they did not submit all of their releases or speech transcripts. Nevertheless, the communications analysed came from every party, and 108 of the 121 sitting members, in New Zealand’s Parliament. Furthermore, the proportion of documents in the dataset attributable to each party loosely paralleled the number of parliamentary seats that party held, suggesting the two overlapping sources yielded reasonably representative coverage (data available upon request). Moreover, we aimed not to present an exhaustive analysis of all of the political discourse, but to explore patterns evident in written communications intended for wide distribution and media up-take.

All health professionals should be concerned that, despite the government’s adoption of the Smokefree 2025 goal, discussion of the goal was neither a sustained nor a prominent feature in New Zealand politician’s press releases and public speeches. Nor should we expect political parties to focus on tobacco in the election lead-up; the dip in tobacco-related references during the 2011 election period suggests politicians do not see tobacco control as a high priority election issue.

Discussion of the goal was strikingly unbalanced across the parties, and depended heavily on the contribution of a single politician, Minister Turia, who will retire from Parliament after the General Election in 2014. As Associate Minister of Health with responsibility for tobacco control, Minister Turia would be expected to refer most often to the smokefree goal. However, Smokefree 2025 is a major public health goal and achieving it will require cross-government action, so it is reasonable to expect that all politicians with responsibility for or interests in health and other relevant policy areas would also refer frequently to the goal.

Continued progress toward Smokefree 2025 depends on politicians, the media and the public to actively embrace the 2025 goal. This will require the Ministry of Health, other key government and non-governmental agencies, health practitioners and the tobacco control community to promote and advocate the goal. Politicians’ overwhelming support for removing tobacco from open display in stores and introducing plain packaging suggests a strong latent interest in tobacco control.

As the New Zealand election campaign develops, we must continue to emphasise the goal’s world leading nature, the strong support it has among the public\(^1\) and health professionals, and the enormous health gains and reductions in health inequalities that will follow from its achievement.\(^1\) Such evidence would help politicians to see the merit in becoming more closely identified with the goal.
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References:  