

Don't let Cuban cigars be stubbed out

The drop in cigar exports is a heavy blow for Cuba's ailing economy – it's time for us to show some support



Sholto Byrnes

guardian.co.uk, Thursday 24 June 2010 17.00 BST

[A larger](#) | [smaller](#)



Cuban's have 70% of the world market in cigars. Photograph: Pedro Armestre/AFP/Getty Images

When a statue of Isambard Kingdom Brunel was unveiled at the London college bearing his name three years ago, some commented on the absence of the cigar that Brunel was rarely seen without. (He got through 40 a day.) The worry was, apparently, that Brunel's vile habit had fallen victim to the disapproval of drinking, smoking, violence and gambling in public spaces.

Brunel University and the sculptor both denied this. It was a matter of aesthetics, they said. But news comes of a much greater threat to the cigar industry than moralisers – a threat so grave it leads one to question whether a stogie would even be available to a late 21st century or 22nd century Brunel. Cuban cigar exports have dropped by two thirds in three years, according to a report this morning, falling victim to a combination of the recession, a drop in airline passenger numbers (a quarter of sales are in duty free), and the smoking bans that have already driven puffers out of taxi cabs, offices and restaurants – and perhaps soon will shoo the huddled masses from the doorways, awnings, public parks and private vehicles in which they are now forced to take a pleasure known to mankind for centuries.

This is a tragedy not only for those for whom no celebration is complete without handing round the cigars – as happened, for instance, after my godson's christening in Cambridge recently. (You may be glad to know that he neither partook of, nor indeed was even present, during the consumption of said Cohibas.) Nor would this loss be felt merely by students of iconography, who associate a solid cigar not only with Churchill, but also with sportsmen such as Babe Ruth, gangsters such as Al Capone, and a long list of celluloid and musical luminaries including Fats Waller, Groucho Marx, Jack Nicholson, and – let his name be inscribed on the scrolls of honour – the inimitable Boss Hogg from the Dukes of Hazzard.

No: more than that, it is pretty serious for Cubans, who have 70% of the world market in cigars. Stubbing out this source of revenue would be a heavy blow for an economy

that is already in a critical condition and which has long laboured under an American embargo imposed when the cold war was at its chilliest but which makes no sense today. You don't have to be a supporter of the Castro brothers' regime to find the continuation of this blockade cruel in the extreme, when it is the Cuban people rather than the elites who suffer from it most.

So there are two options available to those concerned about the plight of Cubans in these hard times. One is to write to Barack Obama urging him to end the embargo, echoing the call of Washington DC's Cato Institute (named, I believe, after the Roman statesman rather than Inspector Clouseau's homme d'affairs): "It's time to let go of a policy that only serves to punish the innocent and antagonise our friends. Let Cubans freely taste the carrot of our prosperity through trade."

The other – and I realise this would be an unpalatable choice for many – would be to support the Cuban economy by following the example of Brunel and taking up cigars; although I would suggest starting with the odd post-prandial rather than aiming to match his heroic consumption straight away. If smoking them yourself is just too much, you could always take a tip from Ronald Reagan, no friend of Castro but who certainly thought of himself as a lover of liberty. In the 50s he appeared in a seasonal advertising campaign saying: "I'm sending Chesterfields to all my friends – that's the merriest Christmas any smoker can have."

So, take one for the Gipper – and for the Cuban people – lighten up and light up. Let me remind you of the line from the old Henri Winterman cigar ads: "No one's too grand for a Grandee."