

Will the overweight join smokers as social lepers?

The smokers tried to warn us. "Once they've taxed us and censured us and chased us outside the building into the weather and limited us in public and called us stupid in private and made us look at their awful packages and taxed us some more, who will they come after next?" the smokers asked, and now the answer's coming in:

A Toronto newspaper yesterday reported results of a public-opinion survey it had commissioned: almost half of Canadians would support a "fat tax," an additional sales tax on chips, candy, soda pop, and the like.

But who can doubt that the crusaders, once they got started, would expand this to cover burgers, cookies, who knows what? An alliance between the anti-fat people and the animal-rights people could outlaw the cheeseburger altogether - never mind taxes - by 2010.

And once we're taxing selected behaviours, where do we stop? (Remember the Monty Python skit about a tax



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on "it" - sexual relations? "Well," somebody says, "it would certainly make accountability a lot more interesting.")

The fat-tax survey, conducted for the Globe and Mail, also found that Canadians think just as much money should go into promoting fitness as has been put into fighting smoking.

Great - maybe our government could lie to us some more. If you're old enough to remember the Participate Action campaign - Canada's last stab at mass fitness - you may recall those ads about the average 60-year-old Swede being as fit as the average 30-

year-old Canadian. Lies, it turned out, all lies. Somebody at Participate's ad agency made up that "fact" and decided that the government should lie to us to get us out jogging.

There's something all too painfully Canadian about the idea that everybody simply has to do what's right, and if they don't we'll punish them. The government already taxes tobacco and alcohol very heavily. And this week we heard about a proposal to tax parking spaces, on and around Montreal Island, to raise more money for public transit. And then there are plans to enforce this Kyoto thing by taxing fossil fuels even more, one way or another.

It's a Canadian mindset: how dare people buy houses in the suburbs and then try to drive downtown every day? How can people be so foolish as to smoke? What's wrong with people who let themselves get fat? Why would anyone want a lap dance? These people are just after fun, that's all! We've got to straighten those people out, and if we can't just ban what they like, we'll

make it really expensive for them.

The Globe article was illustrated with an artist's conception of the warnings - like the ones on cigarette packs - which might go on fatty-food wrappers: "DON'T SCREAM FOR ICE CREAM," says one. "Ice cream is high in fat and calories. Over-indulgence can lead to obesity, heart disease, and social criticism."

Gaspi! Oh no! Not social criticism! Anything but that, please, I beg you! We're a censorious lot, we Canadians. And we're willing to use the power of government, at a moment's notice, to coerce each other into the behaviour some self-selected and sententious opinion-leaders have decreed to be appropriate.

There's not much individualism in us. And by huddling together, through Medicare and all the rest of our "social safety net" - sounds much better than "cradle-to-grave nanny state," doesn't it? - we give the group all this power over the individual.

You're not the master of your fate,

nor the captain of your soul: public opinion polls, backed by consumption taxes and "social criticism," will decide your lifestyle. And you can't complain, because if you had an early heart attack, or got lung cancer, the rest of us would have to pay the bill, and so we get to dictate how you live.

Something like a fat tax seems like almost a sure thing. Even in the U.S., land of individualism, 17 states reportedly have special taxes on soda pop and/or other high-calorie, low-nutrition products. And yes, obesity is indeed a problem, and the companies that sell fatty foods do have billion-dollar advertising budgets.

But it would sure be nice if Canada's public decision-makers could find a way to help each person make informed personal choices about such matters, and live with the individual consequences, rather than herding us around like so many sheep.

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