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Should Quebec march to Ontario's beat?

“Nature moves too slowly; I think we need to follow the example of our neighbours in Ontario” he said to me. It was late January, and I was speaking with Health Minister Philippe Couillard about his new anti-tobacco law. I had just asked Mr. Couillard, “Aren't half the cafes in Quebec already 100% non-smoking? Why do we need a law like the one you're proposing when things are changing naturally?”

Other statements Couillard has made since I first met him that day in January convince me that he does indeed look to Ontario for his direction. In late May, he even reproduced a completely absurd statement that Ontario's anti-smoking activists repeat often: “It would take a tornado to adequately ventilate a bar or restaurant where there is tobacco smoke.” Really? How is it that we can adequately ventilate mine shafts more than 1 kilometer below the earth, or underground parking garages? Disturbingly, neither the English nor the French language media seems to have questioned the Minister regarding such an absurd statement.

Do we really want Quebec to become more like Ontario? Although Ontarians are quite nice, the government's role in their lives isn't. In fact, the Ontario provincial government seems to view Ontarians as sheep who can't be trusted to think or make choices for themselves. I can't think of any other way to explain the numerous laws aimed at controlling people's behaviour over there. For example, I have to break two laws just to engage in one of my favourite past-times in Ontario: cycling to a park with my picnic lunch, a bottle of wine, and a friend. This is illegal, since I don't cycle with a bike helmet, and having some wine with your picnic is also forbidden there. Even at outdoor concerts, Ontarians are not allowed to have a beer unless they go to a special, segregated “beer garden” far from the stage. No wonder Ontarians like to come to Quebec for New Year's Eve and other holidays – their own government has made it impossible for them to relax and enjoy themselves!

And now Mr. Couillard wants to copy Ontario's anti-smoking crusade. Whatever we think about smoking, freedom loving Quebeckers should oppose the Ontario approach to this issue. Once we accept that government should coerce us to protect us from ourselves, there's no end to it. More restrictions on alcohol, a tax on “junk” food, mandatory helmets for everyone, orders on how to raise our children – all pursued with our own tax money and, obviously, against our will (otherwise, why the need for a “ban”?).

Working towards a “tobacco-free future” isn't even a legitimate goal for government – simply put, many people love their cigars, pipes or cigarettes. What would the Jean-Paul Sartre, Winston Churchill and Renée Lévesques of the world have said to such a goal? As a friend of mine recently said, “If government wants to start enforcing the preferences of some people on everyone, I for one think it should be forbidden for men to show their chests in public, but obligatory for women to do so.” A more legitimate government

objective is helping everyone who WANTS to stop smoking to quit, but not endlessly harassing them (a “de-normalization” campaign paid for by their own tax dollars) until they agree to quit.

Ah, but the cost of smoking to the health system justifies government harassment and coercion, you say? This kind of thinking leads us into a blind alley of petty judgements and endless bickering about who costs society more, a rotten path unworthy of our great heritage and society (but as long as we’re on the topic, plenty of economists have pointed out that smokers subsidize the system with the high taxes they pay and early, pre-pension deaths). When we adopted universal health care, I hope we did not sign over our bodies to “the collective.” “Public health” should never mean forcing or harassing people to conform to the whims of bureaucrats, health professionals, politicians, and crusading lobby groups. Rather, it should mean what it originally meant: standards for clean drinking water, vaccinations, inspecting food for contaminants, pollution controls, and similar issues outside the realm of individual choice.

Every one of us, including the state health clergy, makes daily choices that reduce our health and impose costs on “the system.” Driving to work rather than cycling, buying a car that is less fuel efficient, watching television on the couch instead of exercising, taking the escalator, eating badly, engaging in risky sports, smoking, drinking, not stretching before exercising, even enjoying some you-know-what while not wearing a you-know-what – the list goes on and on. Mr. Couillard and his friends want to intrude into our personal lives and force us to calculate the cost of each of these behaviours, assign blame, and impose coercive laws on the guilty – in other words, to embark upon the road to hell – with good intentions of course!

So here’s a novel idea for Mr. Couillard: Let Quebeckers choose for themselves which bars, restaurants and cafes to relax or work in. Everyday, more non-smoking establishments emerge to choose from, *naturally*. Nature isn’t too slow – it moves at precisely the speed most people want. As for the anti-smoking campaign, the old policy seems to work well enough – since we started actively warning people in the 1970s of the health risks of tobacco, smoking rates have steadily declined. We’re also living more healthily and longer than ever before, despite all the exaggerated paranoia coming from health militants all around us.

So if you want to copy something from Ontario, Mr. Couillard, limit it to fixing the pot holes in our streets. I almost killed myself on one yesterday, and I was nowhere near a cigarette.

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