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New Zealand unveils butt-out plan

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IF you're a smoker who wants to indulge your habit while gazing over the mountains of the South Pacific, you'd do well to move fast. New Zealand last week announced plans to become the first nation in the world to ban tobacco.

Prohibition won't happen overnight. Instead, the country will raise the legal smoking age each year, so that people born after 2008 will never be allowed to puff. That will eventually mean that tobacco smoking — a practice that's been prevalent in the Americas for thousands of years, and spread around the world after Christopher Columbus introduced it to Europe — may finally start disappearing from one corner of the planet.

This may be a taste of things to come. The Netherlands will ban supermarket sales of tobacco starting in 2024, and the *Medical Journal of Australia* last month called for a New Zealand- style phaseout policy in that country. One in four Americans supported a total smoking ban in a 2018 survey by Gallup.

I confess to having distinctly mixed feelings about this. Smoking kills more than eight million people every year, making it a scourge at least on the scale of COVID-19, which has caused about 5.3 million recorded deaths over the past two years (alcohol, far more widespread, contributes to about three million annual deaths). That alone is reason enough to restrict the practice.

I've never been a smoker, but am old enough to remember the time when an evening out in my birth country, the U.K., would leave your clothes stinking of tar. Thin-end-of-the-wedge arguments were trotted out before a 2007 law there banned smoking in all indoor workplaces.

They came out again before a 2012 law in my current home of Australia, which mandated unbranded and deliberately repellent packaging for all tobacco products. In fact, both countries are far better off for the measures that have been introduced. The worst that can be said of them is that while they've accelerated the decline of tobacco consumption, it's still pretty widespread.

At the same time, we're now at the point where the thick end of those wedges is hovering into view. If you'd suggested 14 years ago that banning smoking in pubs might ultimately lead to states prohibiting adults from undertaking activities that only harm themselves, it would have been dismissed as alarmist. But that's what we're looking at now.

Restrictions on indoor smoking and packaging protect bystanders from passive fumes and reduce the marketing power of cigarette businesses — outcomes that serve to enhance the welfare of all individuals. Further restrictions to limit the exposures of children and fellow householders to second-hand smoking in the home and private vehicles might be justified on the same grounds, even if they would be challenging to enforce.

Outright bans, however, limit the scope of choice the generation of New Zealanders who grow into this new law will be allowed to make.

That sits oddly with the current shift toward more liberal policies on similar matters. More than half of U.S. states (and all of Canada) have now legalized or decriminalized cannabis for recreational uses. Portugal and Oregon

have even decriminalized possession of hard drugs. A referendum on legalizing cannabis only narrowly failed at New Zealand's election last year, and another on euthanasia passed with a hefty majority.

It's hard to justify that differential treatment on harm grounds. Cannabis-use disorders are roughly as common among users as tobacco addiction is among the general population. The links between pot smoking and the respiratory, lung and heart problems associated with cigarettes are surprisingly weak, and there's a dearth of good-quality studies that aren't confounded by the fact most cannabis smokers use tobacco, too.

However, there are much clearer correlations between cannabis use and mental-health problems, including schizophrenia and psychosis, as well as educational under-attainment. Society may deem those risks an acceptable price to pay for the pain-relief benefits and enjoyment that many people get from cannabis — but with the speed at which the drug is being decriminalized, there's been precious little discussion of the issue.

What's clear is that the current breed of tobacco control policies isn't succeeding in bringing down voluntary smoking fast enough without harmful side effects of their own. The very high taxes imposed in New Zealand and Australia — a 25-stick pack of Marlboro Gold at my local supermarket costs A\$48.95 (US\$35) — don't seem to be enough to break the power of addiction.

A change of direction toward a limited and gradual, but ultimately more absolute, measure such as that being introduced in New Zealand is worthwhile, even just so the rest of the world can see whether it's a success or a failure.

Liberal societies will rightly seek to enhance individuals' sovereignty over their bodies, and tread carefully when they take those freedoms away. Addictive drugs already violate that sovereignty, though, by making it physically or psychologically painful to give them up.

Tobacco prohibition in New Zealand will certainly infringe on people's freedoms. Tobacco addiction, however, has been doing that for centuries.

— Bloomberg Opinion