

## The Eternal Nanny

*John Hyde*

Sanctimonious authorities once burned unbelievers at the stake---for the unbelievers' own spiritual good. The modern Nanny State is now more concerned with the unbeliever's stool than his soul and longevity has replaced immortality.

At least once a year somebody finds a new bad habit for me to give up or a looming catastrophe for me to worry about. In the past few years I have been told that I will die young because I am ingesting too much salt, sugar, saccharin, cholesterol, caffeine, steak, tinned food (especially baby food), commercially prepared junk food, eggs, vegetables sprayed with weedicides, fungicides and insecticides, fish with high mercury levels, monosodium glutamate and alcohol; and too little fibre. I will also die young because I am breathing tobacco smoke, lead from leaded petrol, alumina dust from Alcoa's jetty, sulphur dioxide and hydrogen sulphide, furnace smoke and motor car exhaust fumes. I am told to get more exercise but not in the sun, drive in a more satisfactory manner and never touch opiates. Radiation from visual display units will surely kill me if the asbestos in the ceiling does not. I am being threatened by electro-magnetic and atomic radiation, an energy crisis, depletion of 'non-renewable' resources, destruction of the environment, AIDS and holes in the ozone layer.

No sensible person could believe it all, if only because the anti-this and anti-that cults have identified so many ways of dying that we should all be dead more than once, and because doomsaying has such a poor record---so far! Most of us take most of the advice with a grain of salt, and that would be the harmless end of it if the government were not subsidising organisations dedicated to changing our life styles, taxing us to pay for 'Life Be In It' and 'Quit Smoking' campaigns and banning activities such as smoking tobacco in aeroplanes.

As the American prohibitionists discovered, a Nanny Government needs a big stick and a thick skin. Australians are discovering that too. The Tobacco Act, 1987, before the Victorian Parliament has penalties of \$1000 for the first time you offer a sample of a tobacco product to a member of the public and \$10,000 for the second.

To justify its high-handed use of authority the Victorian Government is repeating the unlikely claims of cranks. When short of facts, like most Nannies and all Princes, Democratic Governments too, resort to lies. Particular sorts of information really are public goods, and the greatest cost of governments that cry wolf is that when a truly serious calamity approaches they will not be believed.

For years I believed what I was told: namely, that smoking shortened life span. But I became increasingly puzzled by the want of hard data about a simple matter. I have found some. Dr Ray Johnstone (University of WA Department of Physiology) has summarised the major experimental and clinical literature. The overwhelming evidence of a huge sample is that smokers live as long as anybody else.

What is more it is not just smoking which is not going to kill me. He cites a Multi Risk Factor Intervention Trial--- acronym: MRFIT---in which half of 12,886 men, judged to be at risk of coronary heart disease, were counselled to 'improve' their diet, stop smoking, and exercise more. The mortality rate of those who improved their life style was 41.2 deaths per thousand compared with 40.4 deaths per thousand among those who did not. The huge study took ten years and cost \$115 million.

Dr Johnstone surveyed nine studies which together cost about \$1,000 million dollars. This is his conclusion: 'Public health campaigns to improve life style produce no beneficial effects on health and should be discontinued.'

The evidence is a bit of a shock to a non-smoking, light drinking, jogger who eats polyunsaturated margarine. The Government is lying, or at best telling half-truths. Nanny is often selective in the stories she tells us. She knows that the literature as a whole reflects much disagreement about the things she doesn't like and their effects upon health---but she chooses to ignore the conflicting or non-supporting evidence. For instance, such is her zeal to limit smoking in the workplace that she has overlooked the evidence that points to the resulting ill-health among those employees who are forced to do so. Nevertheless, Nanny knows best.

How Nanny gets away with it is fairly clear---we know so little; she is an Authority. How can we but trust her?

The real puzzle is why the government should lie about this? Who benefits? Mr Bob Browning's publication, 'The New Organisational Weapon' explains how Nanny can be influenced. Browning describes government-sponsored community groups: how they receive taxpayer funded hand-outs; how they have interlocking memberships; how they are controlled by very few people; how they have an anti-business bias, particularly big business; and how, by claiming to speak for consumers, the environment, health care users, etc. they have the ear of governments.

These organisations include such well known names as Australian Federation of Consumers Organisations, Australian Conservation Foundation and Australian Council of Social Services. They are run by people who speak of 'the structural

violence of capitalism' and use slogans such as 'Nestle Kills One Million Third World Babies a Year.' The National Health and Medical Research Council which advises the government on food and drug standards and smoking has no identifiable neo-marxist bias but its position of influence is even more privileged.

The advisory councils are in the hands of people with a sometimes passionate dislike of individual liberty because individualism leads inexorably to ownership and voluntary exchange---in short to capitalism. At other times they are in the hands of arrogant people who give little weight to others' opinions and liberty. They call the advisory process 'participatory democracy', but others call it 'corporate statism' in which the members of privileged councils alone participate. They are certain they are right and when you know you are right all lies become 'white'.

Enjoy your post-prandial port and cigars. Merry Christmas.