

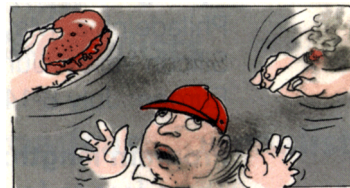
Don't ban smokers...

...burn them...and lots of others, too

AT THE end of last year, a town called Friendship Heights, in Maryland's Montgomery County, approved America's (and thus the world's) strictest tobacco policy. Town officers courageously banned smoking on all public property, including streets, pavements and public squares. "It's a public health issue," said the mayor, Alfred Muller, who is also a doctor. "We don't have the right to outlaw tobacco, but we're doing what we can within our rights."

This newspaper has expressed disgruntlement with the element of intolerance that is increasingly manifesting itself within America's anti-tobacco movement. It must be said, however, that doughty Friendship Heights has discovered an approach that liberals can embrace. Private property is its owners' sanctuary, but the public rules in public spaces. Undeniably, the streets belong to the government; what happens in them, therefore, is the government's business.

On this worthy principle, smoking should be merely the beginning. For example, it is clear that the consumption of fatty foods contributes to heart disease, strokes and other deadly ailments. Besides, eating junk makes you fat and ugly. What people do at home is their own affair, but why allow them to abuse the public streets for this gluttony? America's pavements and boardwalks are overridden with persons, many of them overweight, who amble along licking ice cream or gobbling chips. In many cities, hot dogs are mongered, quite openly, on the pavement itself. All this should be stopped. Not just in Friendship Heights but in other enlightened districts, it should be illegal to eat anything but low-fat



foods in public zones. Because Americans consume too little by way of fruits and vegetables, in time (it is best to move slowly, because people's rights *must* be respected) streets should become strictly vegetarian.

More can be done. Shrieking newspaper headlines create stress for those who may not wish to view them. People who want to buy and read papers should therefore be required to do so in private. America has long and justly sought to prevent the entanglement of religion with public life. What people do in church or at home is their business. However, praying, sermonising or wearing religious garb in the streets surely compromises the requirement that the public weal not be dragged into supporting religion.

There is the environment to consider, as well. That people exhale carbon dioxide in public places, thus contributing to global warming, is probably inevitable, and America's politicians would be wise to permit it. But methane, too, is a greenhouse gas, and an odiferous one. Its emission in public places, where it can neither be avoided nor filtered, seems an imposition on both planetary hygiene and human comfort. Breakers of wind, surely, can be required to wait until they can answer their needs in private; and prosecuted when they fail.

Kudos, then, to Friendship Heights. Other towns should take note. If they intend to fulfil their responsibilities to the health and welfare of citizens, to public order, and above all to the public streets and parks whose rights the authorities are sworn to uphold, then the way ahead is clear.