

The New Criterion

Notes & Comments May 2009

A modest safety proposal

On bureaucratic rules & regulations.

A few weeks ago, the London *Telegraph* reported that the British Department of Transport was proposing a strict twenty-mile-an-hour speed limit on “residential roads and near schools.” Quoth a department spokesman: “We are trying to get the balance right between motorists and everyone else and this is a way of reminding local authorities that they have got these powers and they should use them.”

We shouldn’t think that local authorities needed much reminding on that score. In Britain, as in the United States, “local authorities” like nothing better than sticking their collective noses into the everyday life of ordinary citizens, chivvying them with ever more intrusive rules and regulations, backed up by the coercive power of the state. In the case of the proposed new speed limits, enforcement will be aided by the ubiquitous surveillance cameras deployed nearly everywhere in Britain at the moment.

Like many proposals formulated by the bureaucratic soft-totalitarians that rule over us these days, the twenty-mile-an-hour law strikes one alternately as amusingly absurd or downright sinister. The sinister side, we hope, does not require elaboration. The amusing side may be slightly less obvious. It reveals itself in such observations as this: “Research has found that pedestrians hit by a vehicle at 20 mph have a greater chance of survival. Only one in 40 dies at 20 mph, compared with one in five at 30 mph.”

You don’t say? Well, by that logic, we have an even more safety-conscious proposal. We do not even need any “research” to assert that lives would be saved were motorists required to observe a five- or even a two-mile-an-hour speed limit. We’d wager that “research” would find that pedestrians hit by a vehicle at one mile-an-hour do even better than those mowed down by the speed demons traveling at twenty. If saving the lives of pedestrians is the overriding goal, the goal to which everything must be sacrificed, why not simply extract the engines from automobiles altogether and convert them into horse-drawn carriages. Of course, pedestrians can be knocked down and trampled by a horse just as easily as they can be hit by a car, so perhaps it would be better if everyone just stayed at home. “Tout le malheur des hommes,” said Pascal, “vient d’une seule chose, qui est de ne savoir pas demeurer en repos, dans une chambre” — “all the unhappiness

of man comes from one thing, that they don't know how to stay put in their room."

This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 27 Number 9 , on page 3

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