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## Bloomberg's ban

If there is one thing on which most Americans agree it is that the nation has become too fat. And the problem is getting worse: child obesity is on the rise. Which is why we generally applaud Michael Bloomberg, New York's mayor, for his ceaseless efforts to promote public health.

Yet Mr Bloomberg's recent decision to ban the sale of sweetened drinks in portions bigger than 16 ounces (475ml) goes too far. There is a thick line dividing healthy from unhealthy. But the line between soft paternalism and coercion is a thin one. Mr Bloomberg has overstepped it.

Until this point, the mayor has largely been on the right track. Banning smoking in restaurants and bars – and then extending that to any public buildings – makes sense. Second-hand smoke is harmful to others. In contrast, drinking supersized cups of Pepsi affects only the purchaser.

In the case of trans fats, Mr Bloomberg purged a deeply unhealthy ingredient that was invisible to restaurant customers. Again, the distinction is clear: purchasers of 16oz fizzy drinks know what they are buying. Likewise, the mayor has required chain restaurants to post calorie counts against menu items. This also falls on the right side of the line. Information does not restrict freedom.

The latest measure thus fails on philosophical grounds. It also fails the pragmatic test. First, it would be easy to beat. There is nothing to stop the consumer from buying several drinks at the same time. Second, it does not raise revenue. Instead of ordering a crude prohibition on size, Mr Bloomberg should have imposed an excise tax.

As New York's smokers will attest, making something dearer forces users to think twice about how much they want to buy. Nor need the outcome be regressive. A soda tax would raise revenues that could be used to promote healthy activities, such as more physical education in schools, cheaper vegetables for food-stamp users, or better urban facilities for cycling.

While Mr Bloomberg's latest prescription goes too far, his diagnosis is right. America's obesity epidemic needs to be tackled at many levels. But to get anywhere it must include the federal dimension. Washington maintains a corn subsidy that all but guarantees shops will be filled with fructose-heavy products. Anything Mr Bloomberg can do to expose that would be a real service. The US has a payout system that benefits a few Midwestern farmers at the expense of everyone else. Here is something really worth banning.

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