

Distracted while strolling

I'm too old to need a crossing guard to look after me at public intersections, and if I did, I wouldn't pick New York state senator Carl Kruger (D-Brooklyn) to do the job.

Kruger's the guy who wants to ban "distracted walking" by pedestrians on public roadways. According to The New York Times, the bill he's introduced in Albany "would ban the use of mobile phones, iPods or other electronic devices while crossing streets." Street-crossings are just the start. A ban would also affect joggers who listen to music, even on quiet suburban cul-de-sacs. Or country dwellers who step out to check on their mailboxes. And should we forget sidewalks? They're where some of the most dangerous bicyclist-pedestrian collisions take place.

If absent-minded perambulation ("walking while wired") is a serious hazard to anyone, it's probably not to nearby drivers, who bring 3,000 pounds of metal protection with them.

Nor is Kruger's main argument that it's rude and inconsiderate for some road users to go around ignoring the presence of others. Most of us (perhaps especially most New Yorkers) aren't looking to call in the government to enforce good manners by law.

No, Kruger is nothing if not frank that he's on this kick For Our Own Good. "When people are doing things that are detrimental to their own well being, then government should step in," he says.

That's the philosophy under which Mayor Michael Bloomberg snatched away the city's best French fry recipes.

Even were the sole aim to protect strollers from their own negligence, it's not clear there are big safety gains to be had. Phone use on the street has become near-ubiquitous in recent years, yet over nearly all that time — nationally as in Gotham — pedestrian death rates were falling steadily, just as highway fatalities fell steadily over the years in which "distracted driving" became a big concern.

In the first half of 2010, the national statistics showed a tiny upward blip (0.4 percent), occasioned by a relative handful of fatalities in a few states. Even a spokesman for the Governor's Highway Safety Association, Jonathan Adkins, seems to agree it's premature to jump to conclusions: "You don't want to overreact to six months of data," he told columnist Steve Chapman.

Like others who seek quasi-parental control over adults, Sen. Kruger tends to infantilize his charges. He told the Times: "We're taught from knee-high to look in both directions, wait, listen and then cross. You can perform none of those functions if you are engaged in some kind of wired activity."

This drew proper scorn from columnist Chapman: "Actually, you can perform all those functions and dance an Irish jig, even with text messages or rock music bombarding you." That some ear bud devotees don't take due caution is no reason to pretend they can't.

And that's one reason proposals like Kruger's are so unpopular: they ban all sorts of behavior that's perfectly safe-for-conditions. Lest we forget, mobile communication is itself a powerful contributor to safety and good order: because of it, road accidents and

breakdowns get called in for rescue faster, criminals are caught or deterred because the witnesses carry phones, families can check each other's whereabouts, and so forth. Some will be reminded of the words of C.S. Lewis, who wrote, "Of all tyrannies, a tyranny sincerely exercised for the good of its victims may be the most oppressive." He added that "omnipotent moral busybodies" who "torment us for our own good will torment us without end for they do so with the approval of their own conscience."

I was thinking more, though, of how comedian Lily Tomlin used to say that she was worried: "I worry that the person who thought up Muzak may be thinking up something else."

I worry that at some point Sen. Kruger is bound to swap ideas with Ray LaHood, the current U.S. Secretary of Transportation.

LaHood, famous for his campaign against "distracted driving," suggested last year — in perhaps the loopiest proposal yet advanced by any member of the Obama cabinet — that automakers include jamming mechanisms in cars so that occupants (probably including passengers) couldn't use cell phones. What could possibly go wrong? And great in emergencies too!

When Secretary LaHood learns about the distracted-walker menace, he might start figuring how to take away the instrumentality so chat-prone pedestrians aren't even tempted to disobey.

Universal roadside jamming? TSA booths to frisk joggers' sweatpants?

Please, don't anyone get him started.

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