

[Yes, Virginia, there is a slippery slope](#) [1]

Written by [Sam Bowman](#) [2] | Wednesday 28 March 2012

A lot of people don't like slippery slope arguments. To people who see themselves as pragmatic, slippery slope arguments are a convenient way for ideologues to rule out small reforms. As such, people who don't already believe in the intrinsic badness of government are usually unmoved by the idea that a little reform they like might lead to a big reform they don't like somewhere down the line, and dismiss the case altogether.

The worst thing about FA Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom* is the name: many people who haven't read it (and a few who have) assume that Hayek's argument is that a state-provided safety net will inevitably lead to totalitarianism.

But slippery slopes really do exist. One good example is tobacco control. The health lobby tends to use tobacco as a testing ground for new pieces of authoritarianism, then extends them over the other things it doesn't like.

When we released our [Plain Packaging report](#) [3] on the latest anti-smoking wheeze thought up by health lobbyists, we warned that, if implemented, plain packaging laws would eventually be extended to things like alcohol. This was nonsense, said the health lobby. Tobacco is unique.

Well, yesterday the government released details of its [alcohol strategy inquiry](#) [4]. Among the areas it will look at like 'raising the legal drinking age' (because that works so well in the USA?), and 'reducing the strength of alcoholic beverages' (like [Iceland](#) [5], which prohibits the sale of beer with more than 2.25% alcohol by volume strength), was this:

'Plain packaging and marketing bans.'

Ah. Looks like tobacco isn't as unique as they assured us it was. (Dick Puddlecoat also [mentioned this on his blog](#) [6] yesterday.)

This shouldn't be a surprise. As soon as Australia passed its plain cigarette packaging law, the health lobby moved on to alcohol. Winning the first piece of ground allowed them to move on to the next piece of ground. We saw this in the creep of 'sin taxes' from tobacco and alcohol on to fatty foods and online gambling, and it's happening again on the packaging front.

When some people make policy proposals, they think of themselves as all-powerful autocrats, supporting

precisely the policy they themselves want, and able to limit governmental power along exactly the lines they think are appropriate.

But that's deluded. The reality is that a government big enough to tax and control the things you disapprove of is big enough to tax and control the things you approve of, too. Slippery slopes are real, and they're dangerous.

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