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Let Them Eat Fruit Kebabs

No one would have been surprised to read recently of the high school tuck shop operator who threw in the towel because she couldn't make a profit under the government's new healthy eating regime.

No surprise either to learn that a group of students fundraising for a trip to Japan cashed in on the tuck shop-free interlude to run a week-long daily sausage sizzle and baking stall. The local dairy also helped fill the gap in the market, turning a brisk trade in pies, chippies and fizzy drinks.

More evidence of the law of natural consequences in action and the follies of social engineering.

The ministry of health's new food and beverage classification system which kicked in on 1 June this year bans tuck shops from selling such food which it classifies, quaintly, as 'occasional' items, meaning "provision should be limited to about one occasion per term" (presumably one sausage or pie per pupil per term). Are these people real?

Various government departments and agencies, including the sports-funding body SPARC on its super-priced new website *Mission On*, have put forward a range of healthy fundraising options for parents and pupils, such as selling sunscreen, vegetables, unbuttered popcorn and fruit kebabs.

Fruit kebabs? Those of us who have done time manning a sausage sizzle on the sidelines of a polar wind-swept soccer field can imagine what a hit they would be. Not to mention the health and safety issues that would arise in putting them together.

Like moves to limit the number of 'undesirable' businesses such as liquor or takeaway outlets, killing off tuck shops is just one more in a long line of government interferences in our personal lives, designed to 'denormalise' certain behaviours and relieve us of having to make moral choices and

judgments, especially those of us who may be deemed more 'at risk' of making bad choices.

Rather than assuming people are generally fit to make their own decisions and allowing them to bear or enjoy the consequences, good and bad, the paternalist state focuses on diminishing their access or temptation, treating them as weak, impressionable victims, prey to advertisers and retailers, who need to be protected from their own foolishness.

As British Conservative leader David Cameron said in a brave speech in Glasgow last week, *"We talk about people being "at risk of obesity" instead of talking about people who eat too much or take too little exercise ... it's as if these things – obesity, alcohol abuse, drug addiction – are purely external events, like a plague or bad weather. Of course, circumstances – where you are born, your neighbourhood, your school, and the choices your parents make – have a huge impact. But social problems are often the consequence of the choices that people make. There is a danger of becoming quite literally a de-moralised society..."*

Cameron raises a fundamental question about the role of government and the limits of its right to control individuals or enforce certain behaviours, whether through physical, legal or moral coercion.

The relevant principle embraced by most free democracies was famously set out by John Stuart Mill in 1859 in *On Liberty*, a rational defence of the freedom of individuals and their rights against the state. His argument was that:

"... the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant. He cannot rightfully be compelled to do or forbear because it will be better for him to do so, because it will make him happier, because, in the opinions of others, to do so would be wise or even right. These are good reasons for remonstrating with him, or reasoning with him, or persuading him, or entreating him, but not for compelling him or visiting him with any evil in case he do otherwise. To justify that, the conduct from which it is desired to

deter him must be calculated to produce evil to someone else.... In the part which merely concerns himself, his independence is, of right, absolute.”

Limiting the availability of fattening foods, like moves to ban the advertising of unhealthy products, restrict ‘undesirable’ businesses or determining what lightbulbs people may buy, flies in the face of the very basis of a free society. As David Cameron argued, they are incremental steps towards a society where individuals are ‘infantilised’, no longer capable of self determination, and where normal behaviour is that defined and condoned by the state.

Such steps should be resisted. Decisions about what food our children should eat are the responsibility of their families, just as it is to teach them right from wrong, good from bad, and the law of natural consequences.

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