

Who is afraid of the nanny state?

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The House of Lords has issued a report that identifies the reason for the obesity crisis that the UK is facing. As they put it, the UK government has been so frightened of being described as a nanny state that it has failed to protect us from the deliberate harm caused by the profit-maximising ultra-processed food industry that has promoted addiction to sugar.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gdo5tyV3oVc?si=bk8EOQaxHojG0ZUp>

This is the audio version:

https://www.podbean.com/player-v2/?i=42gcg-1748b38-pb&from=pb6admin&share=1&download=1&rtl=0&fonts=Arial&skin=c73a3a&font-color=auto&logo_link=episode_page&btn-skin=ff6d00

This is the transcript:

Who is afraid of the nanny state? It turns out that the UK government is. Who says so? The House of Lords do, in a recent report on the state of medical health in the UK, particularly with regard to obesity and our over-consumption of ultra-processed foods.

What do they mean by the nanny state? They use the term in the way that right-wing thinktanks do. Those right-wing think tanks, the Institute for Economic Affairs, the Centre for Policy Studies, and all those other organisations based in or around Tufton Street, very near the House of Commons, use the term 'nanny state' to describe a

government action that is, in their opinion, overprotective of people and denies them choice.

The House of Lords says that actually the government has been so frightened of this terminology that they've failed to take appropriate action to protect people. In other words, the UK government has been frightened of being accused of running a nanny state that we have what the House of Lords describe as an obese nation.

An obese nation means that we simply have too many people who are overweight in this country. But the consequences of that are dire. We have lots of people with type 2 diabetes, a disease that has escalated in terms of its significance massively over the last 40 years.

We have people who are getting more and more sick with Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia, which are now clearly understood to be the result of consuming too much sugar during a lifetime.

There is also a lot of chronic heart disease, which is, again, related to this overconsumption of sugar, and there's quite a lot of evidence that quite a lot of cancers might also be caused for the same reason.

In other words, ultra-processed food, which includes vast amounts of sugar in proportion to our needs in terms of consumption, is causing us harm. That is not my conclusion on this occasion. [That is the conclusion of the House of Lords in the report that I will provide a link to below](#). Read it; it's damning of the food industry.

But what is damning is that the reason why we've got into this mess is because the UK government has been frightened of being seen of as a nanny state. The whole neoliberal culture, introduced by Margaret Thatcher, that ran right through Tony Blair, and still does run right through Tony Blair by the way, into and beyond the new Labour years through David Cameron and everybody else, has meant that the UK government has been frightened of intervening when it was necessary to ensure that it protected the people of this country from harm.

Now, one of the most basic functions of a state - even right-wingers believe this to be true - is that it should protect people from harm. They do this in terms of the defence of the realm - in other words, that there should be armed forces sitting on our borders to prevent the alien, as they define it, from invading our shores. We know this all too well with regard to the narratives around migration, most of which are false.

But in this particular case, this is about protecting people from the harm caused by an industry that is out of the control in its creation of foodstuffs which are addictive in the sense that once we've finished eating them, we crave more of that same product even though our body doesn't actually require it to meet any known need.

Why did the state back off? Because of the political pressure from right-wing think

tanks.

How were those right-wing think tanks funded to create this idea? They were funded by the industries that were, of course, promoting these harmful products.

And we know that there is a very long history of industries creating false narratives to support the use of their products. Nowhere was this more obvious than in the tobacco industry, where it was very clear, in retrospect, that that industry had funded false scientific research to deny that there was a connection between smoking and cancer when there very glaringly obviously was.

There's been another false narrative, which is to promote the idea that sugar was relatively good, and fat was harmful, and that has been deeply destructive as it turns out, because we actually need a reasonable amount of fat in our diet, and we do not need anything like the excess quantities of sugar that have been produced as a consequence of the production of ultra-processed food, and that therefore is another case where this industry has funded not just false research, but the promulgation of that through think tanks and others so that it informs government narratives.

And we're still seeing that with regard to these foodstuffs, which are still being advertised in ways that are deeply harmful.

I, therefore, welcome what the House of Lords had to say on this issue. When they looked at the role of the industry, the supposed food industry - and I say supposed deliberately because some of these things hardly qualify as food but are nonetheless consumed by us as if they were.

When they looked at the role of that industry, they say that those companies who make a large proportion of ultra-processed foods in relation to their total turnover should be barred from any active role in government policymaking.

Their staff should not be seconded onto committees.

They should not be allowed to make representations on products which they know to be harmful.

They're saying that these people should be cut out of the decision-making process because they have actually caused harm.

And I believe they're right.

We don't have to have a nanny state. We have to have a state that prevents harm. And preventing harm is necessary when it is impossible for people to individually collect all the information that they would require to make an informed choice.

It is the belief of these so-called right-wing think tanks that we can all make informed

choices all the time and that, in fact, we do so. It is one of the fundamental tenets of their economic belief that we all know everything about everything. They actually believe that is true and that is taught as if it is true to undergraduate economists all over this country and all over the world. And it's obviously wrong. So totally wrong that it actually should be banned from university curricula because quite clearly, any economic belief that is based upon the idea that we all know everything about everything is absurd because we wouldn't then need to learn it because we would know it already. So, it's obviously a falsehood.

In that case, we should instead presume that people don't know and, what is more, that there are so many products on sale in society that it is impossible for us to know everything that we do need to know to protect ourselves from harm, and therefore we will necessarily be dependent upon the state to protect us.

Well, if the state's going to protect us from harm created by business that is deliberately trying to maximise its profit at our expense, it must exclude those businesses that are doing that harm from involvement in the policy process. or the harm will continue.

The House of Lords has, in other words, in their report on obesity, rumbled those who criticise the nanny state by proving that they're not criticising the nanny state as such. What they're doing is promoting the opportunity to cause harm to the welfare of the people of this country.

And yes, they are causing harm. Now there are there are various ways in looking at that, at that harm, but one way of looking at it is, of course, the increase in the number of people with diabetes, which is skyrocketing.

It is the increase in the number of people on things like statins, which is skyrocketing.

It is the increase in the number of people who are suffering and out of work as a consequence of those diseases. And that is increasing, and government ministers say it's a cause of great concern to them.

It is the cost of the NHS of these illnesses, which has been estimated to be one-third of the total cost of NHS expenditure, or nearly £70 billion a year.

It's the cost of extra benefit payments to people who are ill, but it's also the cost of people who cannot work because they literally can't because they've been incapacitated by these illnesses, or they can't work because they're looking after somebody who has been incapacitated in that way.

Whichever way we look at it, these so-called food products are causing us massive harm. And they've done so because the government has been frightened of intervening against an industry that has set out to cause harm by creating what they knew were

addictive products, and yet the government did nothing about it.

I do not believe that should have happened. I think the House of Lords is right to call the government out and say, "Stop this fear of the nanny state and intervene. People cannot accumulate sufficient information to protect themselves. It's the government's job to do so."

We don't need to be frightened of the nanny state. We need to embrace the nanny state. The nanny state is what protects us from harm. And that's what I want government to do. I don't understand why anybody else wouldn't. Unless, of course, they prefer the opportunity to make profit from abuse.