

Wowers never stop stopping your freedom of choice

The attempts by collectivist public health cultists to impose their values on other citizens continue, writes Mark Jarratt*. This time it is a sugar tax, yet another relentless, paternalistic, intrusion into daily life. Adults should be left to make their own decisions: smokers, drinkers, gamblers, and consumers of 'unapproved' food neither need nor want overbearing, dictatorial, anti-free-choice "help", he says.

The long-standing ABC current affairs program 'Four Corners' jumped the shark in their 30 April 2018 edition entitled 'Tipping the Scales', giving extended air time to zealots like the US based anti-sugar spruiker Robert Lustig (<http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/tipping-the-scales/9712342>).

Lustig has been repeatedly and totally discredited as an extremist, holding an irrational and almost evangelical belief that sugar is a major source of "evil". In the first 15 seconds of his 2012 signature presentation urging social control of sugar, Lustig declares sugar consumption to be "the greatest public health crisis in the history of the world!" https://www.ucsfbenioffchildrens.org/news/2012/02/societal_control_of_sugar_essential_to_ease_public_health_bu.html.

A simple web search would have indicated Lustig and essentially every sugarphobe interviewed for the Four Corners story lacks balance, perspective and scientific credibility. The position espoused by lifestyle dictators is intellectually hollow, and fails to withstand objective scrutiny.

The sole interest of tax-and-ban prohibitionists, whether against tobacco, alcohol, sugar or anything other people do which they dislike, is to manipulate the force of law to impose their personal preferences on other citizens, and to use excessive taxation to transfer wealth from the individual (usually the poor, disproportionately) to the state.

Author and journalist Peter FitzSimons responded to the Four Corners episode with another call for a sugar tax (<https://www.canberratimes.com.au/national/time-to-introduce-a-sugar-tax-for-our-children-s-sake-20180430-p4zchh.html>). Perhaps Mr FitzSimons should stick to his area of proven expertise, and not uncritically swallow the simplistic tax and ban "solutions" proposed by authoritarian white sepulchres.¹

As with other taxes and bans, sugar prohibitionists target the 3As – affordability, availability and advertising. The ideologically-driven nature of such thinking is illustrated by the example of tobacco advertising, prohibited for decades. The only advertisements featuring tobacco products are the ugly, public funded and never-ending 'Quit or Die' commands of anti-smoking puritans.

If advertising has the persuasive and behavioural modification powers claimed by prohibitionists, the smoking rate in Australia should be close to zero, not about 1 in 5, after decades of propaganda and ever-increasing punitive taxation, including appropriating

intellectual property (“plain” packaging) for government “shock, horror” images of disease. Advertising and availability usually respond to market demand, they do not create it.

“Pressure” to introduce a useless sugar tax originates solely from self-serving prohibitionists. If implemented, the lifestyle controllers will almost certainly claim a proportion of the revenue as kickbacks, so they can undertake more research, then “educate” (patronise and bully) those who fail to act as required. The wowsers will then lobby for yet more taxes and bans, as that is all they do, and all they know.

The approach is taken directly from the falsehoods and simplistic world view of tax and ban tobacco controllers, merely replacing the word tobacco with sugar. Is alcohol next, do you think, Peter FitzSimons? If so, prepare for the end of Rugby!

For your own good, whether you like it or not...

The threshold ethical question: “What authority does government have to interfere in the lifestyle choices of individuals” is ignored, as are overseas experiences, proving such taxes always fail to achieve anything significant other than providing a source of funds for lifestyle controllers/manipulators, while imposing deadweight regulatory costs.

In every country which has experimented with paternalistic sugar (and food) controls, the effect on consumption or obesity has been negligible. Evidence or findings which undermine the utopian view of a world where citizens obey lifestyle diktats and will thus surely live forever (longevity is seen as the only measure of a good life) are suppressed and ignored.

Sin taxes are a racket, beloved by self-canonised “saints” (prohibitionists), black marketeers (intrusive government intervention creates a ready, profitable market), and sanctimonious, revenue hungry politicians with no respect for individual autonomy, civil liberties or personal freedoms. Ordinary citizens are viewed merely as sources of wealth for transfer to government, to be subjected to state-sanctioned punishment for making choices unapproved by ruling elites.

Ethical difficulties arise if government seeks to regulate the behaviour of those who may only harm themselves with sugar, although such harm is also a dubious claim.

Prohibitionists do not even pretend that “excess” sugar harms others, as done with the fabricated myth of harm from environmental tobacco smoke.

A sugar tax is an ill-considered and authoritarian proposal because:

1. The government has no business interfering with purchasing decisions, other than to make sure that a product is what it says it is through consumer protection. A bottle marked ‘wine’ should contain only wine, rather than, say, antifreeze. It is deeply illiberal to advocate restricting choice by transferring more wealth to the government for some putative or illusory health benefit.

2. A sugar tax would be classically regressive, with the burden falling unequally on those least able to afford it, another unjustified wealth transfer from poorer individuals to government.
3. Large quantities of sugar must be consumed to contribute to serious health risk, but those with a strong preference for sugary drinks, for example, are the least likely to reduce consumption. Demand is relatively inelastic, in common with other targets of 'sin taxes'. If demand was fully responsive to price, nations with the highest rates of tobacco taxation would have the lowest smoking rates, and they do not.

Prohibitionists repeatedly claim that higher taxes will reduce consumption of goods they dislike, more wishful thinking with little connection to actual behaviour.

4. Sin taxes such as that proposed on sugar potentially affect everyone, including the vast majority of people who do not have health problems related to sugar consumption. The collectivist approach of prohibitionist public health thinking is openly hostile to individual free choice and civil liberties to be your own person.
5. Assurances that a sugar tax will reduce obesity are merely speculation. A calorie is a calorie, whether from "unapproved" sugary beverages, or excessive consumption of Beluga caviar. Many factors contribute to obesity; it is unsophisticated and devoid of nuance to conclude sugar is the sole or main culprit.
6. Every new illiberal public health measure is swiftly followed by protests from the self-appointed lifestyle controllers that it doesn't go far enough. See for example the demands for pictures on chips (crisps), confectionery and chocolate packs showing the amount of exercise needed to "burn them off" - <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/health/12101397/Food-labels-should-show-how-much-exercise-would-burn-off-calories.html>.
7. Increasing the price of popular drinks by imposing a sugar tax under government diktat will affect the overall inflation rate. CPI, pensions, public transport fares and other costs are linked to inflation, so the government may have to pay out more as a result. The costs of yet another regulatory and revenue collection regime will also be borne by all members of society, merely to satisfy a small clique of fanatical lifestyle controllers.

Those likely to be affected by a sugar tax would never choose it. Lifestyle control generally is an elitist concern, aimed at manipulating the great unwashed to change their habits. This continual interference in markets and individual decisions makes many people even more cynical about politics. Governments have no mandate to engage in mass scale behavioural modification and social engineering programs.

Sugar tax would be another demoralising speculative "public health" imposition, removing individual responsibility for making choices and for comparing possible health risks against pleasure and enjoyment.

Infantilising citizens

Deciding how to live, and assessing our choices, is central to being an adult. A sugar tax would be yet another authoritarian method for government to infantilise citizens.

Legislators continually indulge prohibitionists, some of the most intolerant and illiberal members of society, determined to inflict their vision of utopia on others. The white sepulchres exclusively have the ear of legislators, while the lifestyle preferences freely chosen by millions of adults affected each day by their proposed intrusive laws are ignored.

Prohibitionist lobbyists are not exponents of reality, and do not understand basic market principles of supply and demand, and of human nature. They demonstrably do more harm than good by:

- seeking to prevent other adults from behaving as they choose,
- infringing personal choice and autonomy, creating deadweight economic costs, and
- intruding into lifestyle regulation without moral legitimacy.

The significant public funds that prohibitionist lobbyists receive should be terminated immediately; they should be forced to compete on the open market for their funding. The wider population would then see how little genuine grassroots support they really have.

The wrong question was asked if the answer is another tax and more government intrusion.

ENDS

ⁱ "How terrible for you, teachers of the Law and Pharisees! You hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look fine on the outside but are full of bones and decaying corpses on the inside". Matthew 23:27

Mark Jarratt has a dislike of lifestyle regulation and coercive paternalism. He's the man who stresses 'manage' rather than 'risk' in risk management; who puts 'why' in front of surveillance for surveillance's sake, and 'why not' into debates about getting rid of 'anti-terror' laws that restrain the rest of society more than they do would-be terrorists. He is a Director of Civil Liberties Australia, and expresses appreciation to Christopher Snowden, author of 'Killjoys', of the Institute of Economic Affairs UK, for the inspiration for this article.