

TRIFLING with our FREEDOM?



CHARLES AMOS
tucks into a proposed
'pudding tax'

Dr Alison Tedstone, Public Health England's 'Head of Diet and Obesity', has recently proposed a new 'Pudding Tax'.

The justification for this new tax hinges on the idea that obesity is a public health crisis. It also assumes that the government should use any means at its disposal, including the tax system, to overcome this problem.

The first of these ideas contains an implicit assumption, which in itself poses an interesting philosophical question. This is the notion that there is one objectively 'good' lifestyle and body

shape to which all people should drive towards. From this, the NHS recommends men consume 2,500 calories per day and women 2,000 calories. Most people take little to no notice of these recommendations. Yet instead of accepting the fact that most people reject their advice, PHE has decided to use more force than ever to perpetuate their Platonic ideal of the 'perfect man'.

The Sugar Tax is the epitome of this paternalist ideology. Taxation is used to manipulate choices to the supposedly objective ends set by PHE. In most cases this end is longevity, something we

reject every day of the week and knowingly too, as Christopher Snowdon sets out in his book, *Killjoys*. Ultimately, as Mises would say, value is subjective. Very few people share PHE's lofty ideals. For most of us, drinking a Coca Cola – even if it means potentially shaving a few minutes off our lifespan – is worth the trade-off.

Once we accept paternalism, it becomes almost impossible to reject other authoritarian policies when they emerge. For if tax can be used in principle then why not extend this principle to cover all 'bad' goods? And if each tax increase is designed to reduce consumption of 'bad' goods further still, and if health and longevity is PHE's only goal, then the movement of taxation can only go in one direction.

Already, PHE has called for more central planning to tackle these issues, including zoning bans on fast food outlets. Even more shockingly PHE has proposed outright calorie caps on a range of foods. An onion bhaji could face a cap of 134, well below its current average. In practice, such measures would amount to outright bans on certain foods as we know them, either through recipe reformulation or 'shrinkflation'.

Supporters of the 'Pudding Tax' might talk about offsetting the cost of obesity to the

NHS, yet the grounds for such a Pigouvian tax are seriously shaky. Estimates of the net cost range from the NHS's estimate of £6.1bn to the IEA's £2.47bn figure. Some studies have even suggested that obesity saves the taxpayer money due to the premature death of obese individuals.

Let us accept though that there is a cost. Would it justify a 'Pudding Tax'? Either way, the policy sets a dangerous precedent in assuming that the existence of socialised healthcare represents a valid reason for eroding individual liberty. Following the logic behind the 'Pudding Tax' to its full conclusion would result in no choice, no personal responsibility and no freedom. The public health movement's current direction of travel is clear – first, tax 'bad' food, then regulate it, then ban it outright.

Unless the principles behind paternalism are challenged, and those of liberalism firmly asserted, the road to total control is clear. Freedom is now under threat●

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*This article was written by Charles during his spell as an intern at the IEA. He's currently planning to study PPE at university. Read more about our internships in **CAMPUS** on page 29*



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