

## Out of the Box



### A new conceptual framework

This is the month of the first World Congress of Public Health Nutrition in Barcelona. In November, the 14th congress of the federation of Latin American nutrition societies (SLAN) convenes in Florianópolis, Brazil. In our discussions there, I and other members of the *New Nutrition Science project* steering group will spread the word that nutrition science should no longer be boxed by 19th- and 20th-century conventions<sup>1,2</sup>. A new conceptual framework fit to face the facts of the 21st century is anyway not such a radical idea, for what is known as orthodox 'classic' nutrition does not have deep roots<sup>3</sup>.

This column is about nutrition and politics. I present the curious case of Tony Blair, and propose that public health nutrition is the key to the door opening to a new political landscape in the USA, the UK and indeed everywhere in the world.

### Nutrition and politics

But first, a criticism made of the new nutrition science so far<sup>2,4</sup> is that it is not sufficiently 'political'. This is said by some of those who associate themselves with public health nutrition, with its implication of communal responsibility. The challenge needs a response. What follows are my own views unless stated otherwise.

'Political' is a 'family' word, with various denotations. In English, 'politics' and 'policy' have different meanings. But not in other languages; in Portuguese, for instance, *política* means both politics and policy. In the English implication of specific political ideology (an -ism), no science, including that of nutrition, is political. Science is not itself Republican or Conservative or, come to that, Maoist or Bolivarian.

Further, Karl Popper rightly opposes the idea of the 'scientific society', governed according to 'laws of science', as dangerous<sup>5</sup>; it foments dictators who imagine they are incarnations of Plato's philosopher-kings, omniscient Leaders of Destiny. Indeed, scientists who advise governments should think twice before making unequivocal statements about, say, the safety of this, that or the other technical development, to powerful politicians whose eyes gleam as caricatured in Britain by Steve Bell in *The Guardian*. That way lies mad cow disease, and more besides.

Science and politics are different types of activity. Scientific findings *of themselves* do not generate any *specific* political programme. Moreover, a judgement that a cause of childhood obesity is consumption of energy-dense foods and drinks, watching television for three or

more hours a day, and relentless advertising of energy-dense foods and drinks on television<sup>6,7</sup>, which parents may regard as a no-brainer, does not *of itself* generate any specific policy recommendations.

The case for legal, regulatory and fiscal policies to protect children against obesity, with all its consequences, has for over a decade been so strong<sup>8</sup>, and the issue now so urgent and important<sup>9</sup>, that the refusal of governments to act effectively has infuriated not only parents and other citizens, but also leaders of our profession<sup>10</sup>. Hooray! But the scientific method does not *of itself* posit any *specific* political or policy programme.

### Nutrition and policy

So the next question is: does the definition of nutrition as social and environmental as well as biological, and as proposed by *The Giessen Declaration* based on ethical and other social and environmental principles<sup>4</sup>, *of itself* mean that the recommendation of public policy is an intrinsic part of the work of nutrition science?

Again, it depends what this means. I agree with colleagues such as Alan Jackson, who insist that the collection and display of evidence is not just conceptually different from its assessment and judgement, but should be kept separate; as in a court of law. And it would be silly to suggest that co-workers who analyse and maybe assess, but do not get involved with policy recommendations or action, are therefore not scientists. So, is being involved in public policy a necessary condition of being a nutrition scientist? No.

This said though, just as advocates and judges are also both lawyers, both research and its display, and the assessment and judgement of research and the formulation of policy recommendations, are scientific activities. Influential scientists work both with research and also with the policy implications of research findings; and this is as it should be. Civil servants appoint advisory committees of scientists to assess benefits and risks on the basis of evidence, and to make recommendations that may become the basis of government policies; and so they should.

And it is in the most stormy and confused circumstances – also knowing that research methodology affects its findings, that the same set of data can be used to justify different conclusions, and that evidence is never complete – when the expert advisor most needs to stay with the science and its principles. Besides, as a rule, the more exact any human activity, the less significant. Yes, assessment and judgement of evidence, and consequent formulation of policy recommendations, are scientific activities.

### Nutrition and sociality

But I think this is not what colleagues mean when they say they want nutrition science to be more 'political'.

I think what is meant is something above and beyond politics in a usual sense: that the profession should be less clinical, and more applied; less preoccupied with originating research, and more with evidence-based action; less concerned with medicine, and more with public health; less involved with the individual, and more with society; less focused on immediate, and more on underlying and basic causes of disease; in short, to be less based on data, and more on principles that apply to the world in which we live now. I agree. The lesser priorities remain important and are often urgent. The greater priorities are now increasingly urgent, and are more important.

But this does not mean that our science should always be orientated in such ways, giving rather less attention to basic research and a lot more resources to public health action. It depends on the times. All professions may enjoy tranquil times, when their accomplishments are so fruitfully contributing to an equitable, contented and prosperous society, that it may be best to become relatively theoretical, for a while. Fernand Braudel hints that there may have been such times in China under the more enlightened emperors<sup>11</sup>.

Maybe there are many examples of such societies, when natural philosophers – scientists in the modern terminology – may rightly become contemplative. But the world we live in now is not such a place<sup>12–15</sup>. The 21st century is not one fitted to the mandarin tendency. I sense that most of us, however privileged and protected our own lives, know this; it's what the evidence of our own science shows. In troubled times any conscientious professional should keep thinking, but also be ready to act<sup>10</sup>. This too is what I sense my impatient colleagues mean.

What is needed is not so much politics, as philosophy that embraces principles of civic life: a deeply thought and felt sense of co-being with and co-responsibility for our fellow humans, and also, for those of us committed to the new nutrition science, the whole living and physical world<sup>4</sup>. The term 'socialist' is mistaken; while originally based on such principles it now ineradicably denotes *specific* political programmes. So, to use a term that could catch on, nutrition should be a science of sociality.

### Go forth and fortify

This concept works just as well for those who remain committed to nutrition as principally or wholly a biological science. An outstanding example of the findings of classic nutrition science being translated into effective national policy action in the public interest is the fortification of flour, in the USA and now many other countries, with folic acid. The principle governing this story is classic public health medicine: that endemic and epidemic disease and

disability should when possible be prevented, and that this is most effectively done by the enactment of policy action, where necessary sanctioned by the state, in the interests of society as a whole.

A speaker at the Barcelona congress is Irwin Rosenberg of Tufts University in Boston. Irv plays down his own leading role, as nutrition researcher, academic heavy-hitter, federal government advisor and campaigner in the corridors of power. But he has reason to claim that 'mandatory folic acid fortification may be the most important science-driven intervention in nutrition and public health in decades'<sup>16</sup>, though, like all great public health actions, it is not problem-free. The year after flour was so fortified, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that incidence of births of infants with spina bifida had decreased by 31% and neural tube defect-affected pregnancies had decreased from 4000 to 3000<sup>17</sup>.

The story should be as famous as that of the fortification of margarine with vitamins A and D, or the distribution of free milk to state schoolchildren, in the early 20th century<sup>18</sup>. Over a period of 25 years, anecdotes and case reports suggesting that spina bifida and other neural tube defects are caused by diets deficient in fresh leafy vegetables, and therefore in folate, became persuasive when supported by observational studies, then developed into standard evidence by a series of trials conducted in the UK, in turn superseded by an international controlled intervention whose unequivocal results were reported in 1991<sup>19</sup>. Folic acid supplements, when given to women liable to have babies with neural tube defects, work.

This gave governments and their agencies three choices (apart from doing nothing). One was to advise women of childbearing age to eat their greens; but information and education programmes are ineffective. Two was to get physicians and clinics to give folic acid pills to women planning to have a child; but half of all pregnancies are unplanned. Three was to fortify the food supply. And this is what the US administration has done. Yes, the government most renowned as champion of the inalienable right of the individual to choose to go to hell in a hand-basket, or in this case to bear and raise deformed children, enacted a law as a result of which practically everybody in the USA is consuming more folic acid. No such action has yet been taken in the UK.

### Nutrition and individualism

Now I come to a curiously related matter. Who said this? 'Our public health problems are not, strictly speaking, public health problems at all. They are questions of individual lifestyle – obesity, smoking, alcohol abuse, diabetes, sexually transmitted disease. These are not epidemics in the epidemiological sense. They are the result of millions of individual decisions, at millions of points in time'.

Three guesses. George Davey Smith, Professor of Social Medicine at the University of Bristol? Even at his most

quizzical, no I think not. Margaret Thatcher, who when UK Prime Minister memorably averred that there is no such thing as society? No, but we are getting warm. The answer is the Rt Hon Anthony Charles Lynton Blair MP<sup>20</sup>. Now into his tenth year as UK Prime Minister, Tony is puffing himself as global statesman, helmsman of his people, and philosopher of third millennium government.

The quote comes from his second public lecture on 'Our Nation's Future', which, he says, are 'about the issues I believe will dominate the public and political debate in the time to come'. He goes on to say: 'We have tried to develop a concept of the State as enabling,' and then, making a significant grammatical stumble, 'its task to empower the individual to make the choices and decisions about their life that they want'.

With urbanisation in the 1840s, 'suddenly, lives that had been led in semi-isolation in rural communities came into contact with thousands of fellow-citizens. The era of public questions had begun'. Cholera was conquered by closed sewers. 'The problems of 19th century public health were colossal. But they were, in a sense, easy to correct. The collective solutions were easy to identify... Once the will was gathered, the levers were there and they worked when they were pulled'. But he quotes a leader in *The Times* in 1854 as a lesson for him now. 'The British nation abhors absolute power. We prefer to take our chances with cholera and the rest than be bullied into good health'.

If these were passages from the essay of a student you were supervising, you would, I suggest, be thinking about transfer to an easier course. Here are a few of the comments you might write. Is childhood obesity a consequence of 'lifestyle' and if so, whose? Tobacco and alcohol are both addictive; so why just a matter of 'decision'? Is it the role of the state to empower the individual who wants to rape, or, within the law, whose idea of fun includes vomiting in the streets? People who live in communities are by any normal definition not isolated. Why did 'public questions' begin in the 1840s? Justify 'the collective solutions were easy to identify' in terms of what was confidently known at the time. How, when will is 'gathered', are levers 'there'?

Dear oh dear! And if you read the whole lecture, you would notice some elisions. Family is mentioned just three times, in a couple of references to parenting and in the phrase 'dysfunctional family'. Community is mentioned just twice, in a reference to a 'Communities for Health' initiative and to under-used community facilities. He does though make several references to himself and to 'my own personal journey' and what 'I want', and often uses the Prime Ministerial 'we'. And like Margaret Thatcher, he evades the word and the concept of society. Instead he emphasises, five times in similar phrases, that 'all of us' is 'individuals, companies, and Government'; which is to say, the sources of his power, money, and votes.

Tony Blair's obliteration of society lies not so much in his politics, which are self-centred, as in his religion, also

centred on the individual, which for him is himself. The explanation is in a foundation text for social democracy. RH Tawney says of the process that has created humans as 'economic animals', 'Individualism in religion [leads] to an individualist morality, and an individualist morality to a disparagement of the significance of the social fabric as compared with personal character'<sup>21</sup>. And now, in an era where morality based on religion no longer has a bonding force, this in turn leads to Big Brother, either in the form of the Leader of Vision, or else beamed in on television and 24/7 on the Internet.

### Nutrition and the citizen

So, one might think, let the citizens of the United Kingdom stew in their own juice – or, to be fair, the 20% or so that voted in New Labour for a third term in 2005.

But here's a funny thing. After all the guff about Victorian governments having it easy, and individual choice in this modern world where (according to his speech a week later given to Rupert Murdoch and the editors of *The Times* and the *Sun* at the Pebble Beach golf course resort on the coast of California) political parties must get into policy cross-dressing<sup>22</sup>, Tony Blair goes right off message, and loses the individualist plot.

For it turns out that he too is in a stew, about public health nutrition. Yes, it's true! The one still just surviving state-run enterprise in the UK is the National Health Service which, every politician knows, is in principle inviolate. And the Prime Minister has been advised and now evidently accepts that the costs of treating chronic diseases are liable to make the NHS collapse, and that junk food and drink are causes of these diseases. Moreover, the campaign of the television celebrity chef Jamie Oliver, backed with petitions signed by hundreds of thousands of wound-up parents, is making increasingly loud pings on the government's radar screen.

So Tony is noticing that 'now, we have legislation on a host of matters pertaining to public health: food, air, water quality, drinking and driving, drug classification, seatbelts... and so on'. Yes indeed, although 'now' is cheeky. And 'Campaigns like those run by Jamie Oliver on School Dinners are not a passing fad, they are central to the nation's future health', which is to say, the news from Lord Philip Gould's focus groups is that yes, we have a new policy agenda item. And so, 'we are working on a code with the food industry on limiting the advertising of junk food to children'. But! 'If by 2007 the voluntary code hasn't worked, we will make it mandatory'. So he says.

Tony Blair is in a stew because acknowledgement that government has responsibilities to society, communities and families is painful for him personally; it does not fit into his individualist theology. I guess he is hoping that it will all go away, or if not, that it will be a cross for Gordon Brown to bear, shambling to the end of New Labour autocracy.

Ironically, if Tony Blair adopts and assimilates his wife's Catholicism, where salvation is not by faith but by works, he would immediately get the hang of government.

Marvellous to relate, public health nutrition may be the wedge that splinters the planks of individualism. My advice to all electable political parties now out of office in countries with soaring rates of childhood obesity and early-life diabetes, is as follows.

Sign up a phalanx of ever-ready scientific advisors prepared to make plain public statements about the consequences for the nation if government does not use its full powers to act in the public interest. If contenders for office want a list of activist experts, they know where I am. Bring together a group of the most powerful executives representing the interests of the food and drink industry as a whole, consult them, and then commit to a programme of legislative, regulatory and fiscal action with public health as the paramount priority. But before doing this, make sure of the support of the most energetic, informed and committed civil society organisations, and the gatekeepers of the broadcast and print media. Who knows, Rupert Murdoch's Chinese wife may come in handy. Commit the party, once elected as government, to a public health nutrition programme that includes stonking taxes on junk food and drink, a complete ban on food and drink marketing aimed at children, the enforcement of nutrition standards for school meals, and free meals for impoverished schoolchildren.

I guarantee that the first political party to convince the electorate that it will do this business will gain a stonking bloc vote, from people who do not see themselves just as individuals, but as members of communities and families, as parents, and as citizens. And yes I have thought twice, and yes, if this puts a gleam in the eye of a Presidential or Prime Ministerial candidate, good.

And industry? Sure, the powers of the nation state are waning. Sure, the ability of any individual government to intervene in matters now governed by international law is limited. But as John Rawls says, politics is the art of amplifying the possible. Where there is a will there is a way. Will industry as a whole, fight a new order in which healthy choices of food and drink really are the easy choices? In general, I think not.

Ah! I see what my colleagues mean when they say that nutrition should get political. Yes, public health nutrition is a political issue.

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