

“Sugar Wars”: The Predatory Sugar and Drink Companies, Health Impacts, Food Choices.

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

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Superficially rational, there are in truth few instincts more fundamentally illiberal than the drive towards preventative policymaking. Henry Hill, CapX, Mar 21, 2016

Fat wars, sugar wars, salt wars. Health humanitarian crusaders; predatory sugar drink companies; and government accountants. The modern age of nutritionist bitching, with its common cast, has again moved into prominent focus with the discussion about taxing sugary items – more specifically sugary drinks. The British Exchequer was certainly salivating at the prospect of more revenue (approximately £530m), though the issue has been sold as a health one. Austerity Britain is on the hunt for more money to fill the gaps in Chancellor George Osborne’s already deficient budget, and taxes dressed up as medical initiatives is one way of going about it.

The sugar tax, which comes into effect in two years’ time, targets drinks with more than five grams of sugar per 100ml, with higher rates applying to eight grams of sugar per 100ml. Soft drink companies are crying foul over discrimination. Coca Cola argues that the policy is inconsistently applied – the 8p charge per can avoiding milkshakes and fruit juices. Some sugar options are sweeter than others when it comes to the tax collector.

Such inconsistencies did not trouble the delighted chef and food campaigner Jamie Oliver, who has been beating the drum of sugar reform for years. “It’s a profound move that will ripple around the world. It didn’t think we’d get it.”[1]

The move has been opposed by some groups who smell a revenue grab in the works. As the organisation People Against Sugar Tax (proudly free of funding from food and drinks companies) argues, “We already have one. It’s called VAT.” In their campaign, they make the case that such a tax “would be ineffective, regressive, unfair and unwanted.”[2]



The PAST group have also received the news from the Office for Budget Responsibility that implementing the tax would cost a billion pounds. Chief executive Brook Whelan smugly noted that such an amount “could pay for the salaries of 14,900 new nurses for the next three years.”[3]

Another critique has also been offered. Implementing such a sugar tax might well increase sugar consumption by changing food choices for the worse. A culinary migration might well be initiated, with drinkers taking up other sweet substitutes.

What, then, of examples? Mexico stole a march on this topic, having its own “very fat problem” with 71 per cent of its population considered overweight or obese.[4] In January 2014, the state where soft drink is king imposed a tax on high sugar drinks, covering those with added syrup, powder, flavour extract, caloric sweeteners or sugar.[5]

What, then, of the evaluative part of this whole policy? Scientists and policy wonks have latched onto one: an unprecedented *BMJ* observational study by the Instituto Nacional de Salud Pública and the University of North Carolina suggesting declining consumption in sugar drinks in the wake of such an excise.[6]

It found in studying the behaviour of 6,253 Mexican households providing 205,112 observations in 52 cities with more than 50,000 inhabitants that “in the short term the tax on sugar sweetened beverages is generally passed on through prices...to consumers, who reduced their purchases of taxed beverages.”

For all its strengths, the authors conceded in the study that “causality cannot be established, as other changes are occurring concurrent with the tax, including economic changes, health campaigns about sugar sweetened beverages, and antiobesity programs.”

Such excises invariably smack of nanny-statism, though the old question always is what nanny actually intends. Doctors and health experts such as epidemiologist Anna Peeters of Deakin University speak of the role of the tax in creating “a culture of healthy eating”. [7] But nannies are not necessarily truthful, sporting the occasional white lie for consumption by the gullible and young. Osborne is a case in point, floundering desperately to plug gaping financial holes.

In Australia, where the debate is also raging, commentators favouring all concerned nanny find her didactically instructive to the sugar fiend. That fiend is to be reformed and reconditioned for his and her own good. Johnny Junkfood is to become Susie Muesli. “Its not about the nanny state treating people like babies,” claims Peter Fitzsimmons from a country that treasures paternal, occasionally punishing direction, “it is the state saying, ‘listen, you

bastards, we wish you wouldn't keep pouring sugar water and the like down your throats, but if you're gunna, you may well start paying us now for the hospital bills you'll inevitably face later".[8]

Since most humans are disposed to be Aristotle's social animals, health is itself the property of the communal, a debate of how society orders it. But all too often, the health motive is concealed by others.

This is collectivised control that has been analogised to controlling smoking, though not all in the anti-sugar lobby are necessarily in the business of putting food companies out of business. (The same cannot be said about anti-tobacco wars, where the abolition of the tobacco company remains the utopia of campaigners.)

An effective system, however, will be impaired if the intention is one of demonising sugar through the guise of public health authoritarianism. Nor should it be assumed that raising the cost of a product in high demand necessarily diminishes consumption - elasticity, and other unhealthy options, will compete. Such health policies invariably assume that the making of a choice has to arise from the cajoling nature of middle class nanny, concerned or otherwise with the actual welfare of citizens.

Dr. Binoy Kampmark was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He lectures at RMIT University, Melbourne. Email: bkampmark@gmail.com

Notes

[1] <http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/7006990/Cola--and-Pepsi-taxed-in-Budget.html>

[2] <http://peopleagainststugartax.com/>

[3] <http://peopleagainststugartax.com/obr-confirms-cost/>

[4] <http://ensanut.insp.mx/informes/ENSANUT2012ResultadosNacionales.pdf>

[5] <http://theconversation.com/what-the-world-can-learn-from-mexicos-tax-on-sugar--sweetened-drinks-56696>

[6] <http://www.bmj.com/content/352/bmj.h6704>

[7] <https://www.scimex.org/newsfeed/expert-reaction-uks-new-sugar-tax-will-it-work--and-would-it-work-here>

[8] <http://www.smh.com.au/comment/the-fitz-files-sugar-tax-a-form-of-prepaid-health--insurance-20160325-gnqydg.html>

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