

Nanny II

John Hyde

When I ordered the cream cake, the attractive young waitress teased me about my diet. I enjoyed the banter---who wouldn't--but she was wide of the mark: I don't think I have "been on a diet" since I was weaned. Nevertheless, she set the assembled AIPP staff to thinking about the source of her conviction that respectable people don't eat cream. We suspected it was one of the government's health campaigns, although none of us could remember when ingesting so many things, including cream, became a cardinal sin.

Similarly none of us could recall when every useful chemical became dodgy just by being a chemical. In the bush, recently, a truck rolled over spilling herbicide onto the road. Every media outlet reported that "toxic chemicals" were spilt. Of course, literally, they were correct, but they were not writing for plants or for people who intended to bathe in the spill.

It seems that the industrial processes which sustain our high living standards now have to defend themselves against *prima facie* assumptions that they are bad for members of the society they serve. The presumption of industrial guilt has two adverse consequences: beneficial processes are delayed or lost and the few dangerous processes are not distinguished from the ruck.

I am getting a bit tired of being told that all sorts of activities are a hazard to my moral or my physical welfare, when I suspect they are not. I think some people are crying "wolf" when there is no wolf to be seen. What is more, I suspect an ulterior motive.

My suspicion is reinforced by the government's inconsistency. The AIDS campaign, for example, makes great play of not discriminating against homosexuality. The statement that a person's choices in this private matter are no business of the government is a liberal statement about the proper limits of government. It does not imply that sexual activity is without moral content or justify covering up the medical risks associated with homosexuality.

In fact, the government-sponsored AIDS campaign is not liberal. It has not avoided questions of personal morality but it has entered the debate on one side. It has managed to imply, without presenting a skerrick of evidence, that sexual activity is a morally neutral activity---even if eating cream and smoking are not. Taxpayers' money is being used in a way that implies that whatever one does sexually is morally OK. Such an attitude deals a serious blow to family life.

Neither is the Nanny state liberal as regards free speech. A liberal society requires the free exchange of ideas. Competing points of view should be permitted and the right of free speech is derogated when one point of view is banned or taxes are employed to promote a partisan view. Indeed, our lawmakers have adopted a decidedly odd double standard when they allow us to see nice young heterosexual couples on television choosing condoms but not cigarettes.

It is not that Nanny state has become so nervous she is saying, "Stay away from everything". For months the AIDS campaign has treated sodomy as if it were no more hazardous than standard heterosexual copulation. So far as I can find out, that is not so. If it is also true, as it seems to be, that sleeping around is somewhat dangerous, then a Nanny who was simply nervous would say plainly, "Promiscuity is a Health Hazard".

Even "facts" in the mouths of governments present citizens with problems. Numerous authoritative taxpayer-financed reports point to the dangers of such diverse things as agricultural chemicals, the radiation emitted by visual display units and even the small amounts of nitrous oxide formed by unflued gas heaters.

The reports are written by experts who tend to assume that users and suppliers are fools. The experts, usually drawn from the physical sciences, never measure the cost of complying with their recommendations, nor do they allow for the feed-back mechanisms which are part and parcel of market economies and democratic polities. The "experts" extend trends without allowing for the automatic reactions of individuals to shortages and perceived risks.

Several of the anti-whatever campaigns follow a pattern. It goes like this. First, find an expert opinion saying that something will kill you---agricultural chemicals, asbestos, alcohol, nicotine, saturated fats and nitrous oxide are all recent examples. Since most things will kill you if stuffed into the body in sufficient quantity, there is no practice, product or industry which is immune. The next step is to argue that the product or activity is dangerous in, say, the quantity one is likely to find on a cucumber or in an asbestos-lined room; that it is dangerous to keep the company of a smoker etc. Finally, convince the government either to ban it or to finance a campaign against it.

The products and practices condemned by these experts have little in common except that they tend to be private.

The public sector has, by and large, escaped criticism. Mr Bob Browning pointed to another phenomenon: many of the same names keep cropping up among the activists who take the expert reports and make political issues of them.

AIPP has progressed from discussion of a cream cake to the organisation of a seminar (Perth Sheraton: Thursday 16 June). It will try to understand just what the Nanny state is up to. Perhaps, like earlier generations, the new wowers merely feel obliged to prescribe for the lower orders, but the top-sided choice of matters to be wowerish about mitigates against that view.

Whatever the motive for propaganda, we should beware of it. Governments which are prepared to employ emotional advertising have a bad record. The AIDS, Life Be In It and Quit campaigns are not politically dangerous in the sense that nonsense about a master race was once dangerous. But, since Goebbels' time, propaganda techniques have become so sophisticated that I would feel safer with a government that did not employ them, even to present my own arguments and prejudices.

There may be nothing sinister in Nanny's injunctions--- she may have no ulterior motive whatsoever---but, on the whole, she seems not to favour personal liberty, strong family ties, or capitalism. Instead she seems to be undermining these values.

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