Diets, exercise and love: how far can governments go?

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Social policy has moved into complex areas where there is no guarantee of success, writes ELIZABETH VAN ACKER

THE ROLE of liberal democratic governments in the private sphere is changing, and contemporary social policies increasingly involve questions about what constitutes appropriate intervention in complex, personal matters. This is evident in political measures that have been introduced to tackle two major problems: obesity and changing family relationships. First, the federal government is developing a series of campaigns designed to encourage people to take greater responsibility for their physical well-being through strategies such as healthy eating and fitness. Second, going beyond its traditional role of regulating marriage as a legal institution, the government has also shown interest in *facilitating* marriage. Governments are attempting to develop education programs that promote and strengthen people's emotional well-being in different phases of their relationships.

In other words, the liberal public/private divide continues moving into the private sphere as policy makers see the need to inform, encourage and provide practical assistance for people to make better lifestyle choices. Obesity campaigns are somewhat easier to "sell" than relationship education (although still challenging). Programs that focus on providing skills training about love and relationships are not as easily articulated or accommodated by political institutions. Nonetheless, in both instances, governments are attempting early intervention and prevention measures and education initiatives. These are public issues that are no longer the sole province of individuals.

Social policies are expected to respond to often intractable problems that reflect changing social structures and values. Many of these problems lie within the personal domain, raising questions not only about how much liberal democratic governments should intervene, but also about citizens' expectations of governments and who should be meeting particular responsibilities. These problems typically have several causes and are often beyond government's direct control. This is the case in attempts to tackle the obesity problem and attempts to develop and sustain strong families. These are issues that elicit concerns about the appropriate role for governments in arenas that are overlaid by a tension between the public and the private.

What is interesting in both examples is that despite rhetoric highlighting individual choice, governments also articulate the need for people to (voluntarily) participate in programs that change behaviour to improve their well-being - either physically or emotionally. These programs attempt to improve people's health or develop personal skills and their prospects of sustaining successful and lasting relationships. The issue comes down to whether, and in what circumstances, governments decide that people's responsibilities to themselves and to others can override their personal rights and freedoms.

These problems are significant for public sector decision making. The federal government is actively working to improve people's health and family relationships through information campaigns. How the government should design such programs to allocate expenditure efficiently remains an open question. Indeed, we can ask: whose responsibility is it to adopt a healthy lifestyle or work on relationships? Is it exclusively the personal responsibility of families, or is there an additional public responsibility? If it is first and foremost the responsibility of families, are governments obliged to provide the resources to assist them to do so? Do the benefits argued to flow from being physically healthy or sustaining healthy relationships justify publicly funded programs? Or, as some popular sentiment maintains, are these matters in fact a private choice and none of the government's business?

Part of Australia's liberal heritage is that the government must carry out some functions to protect citizens against external threat, ensure personal security and provide a system of justice and construct public works and public institutions. Although governments have generally maintained a laissez faire approach to the economy, they have become increasingly responsive to social problems, reinforcing control and surveillance, protecting human rights and families. A criticism of liberalism is that it protects a realm of freedom from government intrusions, but also prevents government from promoting any vision of the good life. There may be mutterings about paternalism, the nanny state and social engineering, but governments have facilitated measures to combat the road toll, smoking, drug use and alcohol consumption. Different policy instruments are evident: marketing campaigns and government advocacy for changes in individual behaviour, laws and regulations.

Anti-obesity campaigns

Governments are concerned about rapidly rising levels of obese children and adults. According to the report Australia's Future Fat Bomb, published last month by the Baker Heart and Diabetes Institute, almost four million Australians are obese. Long-term health problems include adult obesity, coronary heart disease, diabetes, risks to psychological wellbeing, lower educational and income throughout life. Added costs include flow-on effects such as unhealthy - and therefore less efficient and productive - workers, health funds diverted away from other areas of health care and increased strain on the public healthy system.

One of the "big ideas" from the Rudd government's 2020 summit is to develop a "new emphasis on preventative health, including bans on marketing junk food to children and regulations capping the content of unhealthy ingredients in food." The goal is to develop a national preventative health agency which would be funded by taxing products such as alcohol, cigarettes and junk food. It would provide evidence-based research and market public health campaigns. The recommendation also stated that by 2020, every desk-bound job should include thirty minutes of exercise per day. Another suggestion is that employees use open stairwells rather than lifts in office buildings. Slogans such as "make healthy food choices easy" would entail providing "fast fruit" to all primary schools, delivering fresh food to Indigenous communities, improving food labelling and banning marketing of junk food to children.

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd defended the government's strategies to battle obesity. "So you've got two alternatives," he said, "you can either say this is not our problem, we're not going to do anything about this, or you can act. What the government has decided to do rather than just brush it away is launch a $62 million national preventative health strategy to help fight obesity. You can have a go at dealing with the problem, or you can simply say it's too hard."

This approach is open to several criticisms. First, health and anti-obesity campaigns do not work. While a great deal of information is available about what people should eat and how much they should exercise, it is not the case that people will change their life styles accordingly. Second, it is up to individuals (not governments) to take responsibility for their health. Parents should ensure that they and their children eat sensibly and get sufficient exercise. Third, because obesity is a chronic problem, not only governments and parents, but food companies, the medical profession, teachers, sports and community groups and the media can play important roles in preventing it. The Coalition on Food Advertising to Children includes the College of Physicians, Paediatric Branch, the College of General Practitioners, the Cancer Council, prominent dieticians and academics. It advocates a ban on commercial television food advertising at times when children are exposed to unhealthy food advertising. These groups have followed the lead of the anti-tobacco lobby, which has successfully in changing smoking practices through legislation and regulation.

Marriage and relationship education

Divorce rates are stable but remain high. In 1996 there were 2.9 divorces in every 1000; in 2005 the rate was 2.6. Ten years ago, a House of Representatives Standing Committee calculated the cost of divorce at $3 billion per annum. This includes social security benefits, social services, legal aid, health and welfare. This dated estimate suggests that the cost of divorce would be significantly higher in 2008 figures.

Personal relationships may be one of the last bastions to succumb to political intervention. There is a growing debate about whether governments should do more than simply allow and sanction marriage and view strengthening relationships as a legitimate area for early prevention and intervention. The rationale for government facilitation of relationship support is not new. Funding of marriage education has occurred (albeit in small amounts) since the 1940s when the churches focused on preventing marriage breakdown. The Commonwealth government introduced a national *Marriage Act* in 1961 which empowers it to fund marriage education services. These preventive strategies shine a spotlight on people's intimacy and are directed toward providing couples with communication and conflict management skills.

Of course, it is difficult for governments to become involved in personal decisions of emotional intensity that usually characterise love and marriage. Indeed, many people view their relationships as none of the government's business. They believe that they can deal with any tough challenges in their relationship as they see fit. At best, couples may be indifferent to education programs, at worst, they may resist them. Governments have limited capacity to persuade people to participate in the voluntary programs; they can encourage but not force them (unless they are conducted in conjunction with prisons, court ordered child welfare or domestic violence services). If couples are interested in relationship issues, they may prefer to read self-help books or search the Internet for resources. The question remains, what is the role of governments in this personal area?

As I show in Governments and Marriage Education Policy, selling the message about the value of relationship education programs is particularly difficult. How or why should governments intervene in matters of the heart? Our culture reinforces romantic expectations and beliefs about meeting "the one" and "living happily ever after." Furthermore, if a relationship becomes too challenging people may leave rather than work on difficult problems. Couples may consider strategies such as skills training or information gathering about relationships as inconvenient and unnecessary. Just before they marry, many couples are busy with wedding arrangements, so attending classes is another burden and additional cost that they wish to avoid. After marriage, domestic life becomes a priority as couples adjust to new commitments. A major challenge is to develop ways of shaping relationship education as "normal" and as acceptable as ante-natal or parenting classes. In short, governments have not sold the benefits of relationship training to the public or explained the difference between relationship education and counselling which is for couples who confront specific problems. This is not to deny that governments are in a fraught situation. On the one hand, family relationships should enjoy a protected realm of privacy. On the other hand, there is a public expectation that governments have a proper role in providing for families.

Governments are increasingly committed to pursuing public purposes that contribute to improved lifestyles for its citizens. They play dual roles: they provide support and resources, but also outline and reaffirm obligations that people have to their families and the wider community. But of course governments cannot enforce any of these obligations or change people's behaviour. In the two examples provided, political objectives are to support families with appropriate information and services which will assist in promoting healthy lifestyles and family relationships. The goal is to provide clear and user-friendly information to assist people in making good choices. People's daily routines and relationships involve commitments and responsibilities that can be far-reaching. While decisions concerning diet and exercise or love are personal matters which are ostensibly independent of the government, this is no longer the case. Nevertheless, it is easier to develop a convincing argument for government intervention to tackle obesity because this is a legitimate - and visible - health concern. It is more difficult for governments to participate in the game of love. •

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