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Let them eat steak [1]

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I don?t usually bother with New Year?s Resolutions, but waiting until after the Christmas orgy of eating was over seemed like a good idea to start watching what I eat. Discipline has been surprisingly easy, but what?s been hard is to actually decide what to eat. As anybody who?s ever looked into eating healthily will know, there are more diets than there are religions [3]. Low-fat or low-carb? Paleo or South Beach? Cookie [4] or cabbage soup [5]? (Ok, so that last choice sounds easy enough. Sadly, the cookies are mostly made of newspaper.) It makes me wonder how government can hope to improve people?s eating habits, when there?s no consensus about the ?right? diet at all.

The NHS?s Healthy Eating [6] site goes for the mainstream, low-fat approach. Less meat and butter, more pasta and bread. Sounds reasonable, but this could be completely wrong, if people like Gary Taubes [7] are to be believed:

> There are plenty of reasons to suggest that the low-fat-is-good-health hypothesis has now effectively failed the test of time. In particular, that we are in the midst of an obesity epidemic that started around the early 1980's, and that this was coincident with the rise of the low-fat dogma. (Type 2 diabetes, the most common form of the disease, also rose significantly through this period.)
>
> ?Public health authorities told us unwittingly, but with the best of intentions, to eat precisely those foods that would make us fat, and we did. We ate more fat-free carbohydrates, which, in turn, made us hungrier and then heavier. Put simply, if the alternative hypothesis is right, then a low-fat diet is not by definition a healthy diet. In practice, such a diet cannot help being high in carbohydrates, and that can lead to obesity, and perhaps even heart disease.

Are Taubes and the other low-carb people like Atkins right? The whole piece [7] is worth reading. I don?t know the answer, but there?s clearly no obvious position the government should take in advising people about what to eat. If the low-fat people are right, then the government-recommended diet of wholegrains and fruit might be *precisely* what is making people get fat. Even a seemingly-innocuous (if annoyingly preachy) campaign like the ?five a day? idea could be steering people in the wrong direction. Is it good to eat five bananas a day (equal to 70g of sugar, or a sixth of a bag of sugar)? Probably not.

I?m sure most of the paternalists in government and the medical profession think that they are being helpful in providing state-mandated dietary advice. They probably think of "civilians", especially poor ones, as being a lot stupider than they are, child-like and in need of a nanny to help them live healthy (and thus worthwhile) lives. But most state efforts to improve people?s lives cause some nasty unintended consequences ? in this case, it seems as if the obesity epidemic might be, in part, a direct consequence of governments seizing upon bad dietary advice. Another part of this is the cheapness of the high fructose corn syrup that now sweetens soft drinks like Coca-Cola, incredibly fattening and unusually cheap thanks to corn subsidies paid by the US government

[8].

Rather than a "healthy" diet of oatmeal, bread, rice, bananas and the odd lean chicken breast, the best way to eat healthily might be to emulate the diets we evolved to eat: no grains, some plants and a lot of meat. Maybe that's wrong too ? it's hard to know. The obvious solution is for government to get out of the diet advice business altogether. ?First, do no harm? is a good rule of thumb. In reality, they want to tax and regulate food even more [9]. It's a pity ? people should be able to do what they want no matter how harmful it is to themselves, of course, but it's even worse when the government's nannying makes people fatter. A little bit of humility would go a long way.

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