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The fizzy drink tax Fanta-sy [1]

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Tucked away in the twenty-third page of the Liberal Democrat party conference agenda [3] is a proposal to look into ?fiscal measures such as the taxation of heavily sugared drinks?. This follows a recent post by two advocates of such a policy [4] at LSE Politics and Policy which is also fairly alarming. Once again, the political classes have found an issue where they feel other people just don?t know best, and need the government to fix it. The ?solution? is to make us pay more for things we enjoy. They tell us that this is certainly not prohibition ? even the most hardened opponents of fizzy drinks are wary of the word. But they do seem to realise that what they are calling for is starkly illiberal.

Bizarrely, this is not a call for a tax on sugar in all forms, but only sugary drinks. It is a very strange kind of paternalism that does not mind what you consume, if only you consume it in a state-approved fashion. Proponents of the measure suggest that there is something different about these products ? that people do not realise that what they are doing is bad for them. It is hard to imagine that this is true. We are already bombarded with warnings that fizzy drinks are bad for us, and fat-shaming is alarmingly prevalent in modern society. Labels stating the sugar content of these products are already clear and obvious to those concerned. The simple fact is that some people just like fizzy drinks, even if they make them fat.

It is however by no means certain that the science on sugar is settled. The debate in the world of nutritionists is very much alive. The reality is that we can not be sure why people are getting heavier. Some research [5] states that ?Numerous clinical studies have shown that sugar-containing liquids, when consumed in place of usual meals, can lead to a significant and sustained weight loss?. When scientists are not sure that fizzy drinks are ?the problem?, how can politicians be so certain?

If someone is overweight, that is an issue for them, and not for the Liberal Democrats. We should of course welcome research that shows those who want to lose weight how to do so effectively, but it is unlikely that this will come from government. Diversity in approaches to diet and exercise is far more likely to result in the development of effective strategies than by government constraining us all down a set path.

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