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Which nanny – the state or industry? Wowzers, teetotallers and the fun police in public health advocacy

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ABSTRACT

There is no option for avoiding the 'Nanny'. The only option for communities is to make sensible choices about which 'Nanny' will dominate their lives and at what time, which 'Nanny' will make us healthy and which 'Nanny' will undermine our health and our freedoms. Those political ideologues who use 'nanny statism' largely do so to further their own agenda and are invariably inconsistent in how they apply their concept of non-interference.

Who's afraid of the 'Nanny State' is not the question should be asking. Rather the question ought to be – which Nanny should cause the greatest concern? The prime reason that the 'Nanny State' conjures fear is that it is a threat to the freedoms that are a key element of democratic societies. The tenet understood by the concept of the 'Nanny State' is that the more regulation that is made by the State, the more freedoms are whittled away and it is the intention of the wowzers, the teetotallers and the fun police to do so.

It is time to rethink the 'nanny' concept, from the narrow sense of loss of individual freedoms (and one which favours 'free enterprise' and money making interests of big industry) to that which enables individuals and populations freedom from domination. Such a change particularly pertains to our understandings of the role of government.

Pettit's work in framing the notion of freedom in terms of 'dominance' rather than 'interference' is pertinent. It provides a more realistic way in which to understand why industry uses the 'Nanny State' argument. It is to maintain its own dominance (i.e. in matters of public health) rather than allowing governments to interfere with that dominance.

Public health advocacy work is regularly undermined by the 'Nanny State' phrase. This paper explores a series of examples which illustrate how public health is being undermined by the 'Nanny Industry' and how industry uses fear of government regulation to maintain its own dominance, to maintain its profits and to do so at a significant financial and social cost to the community and to public health.

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Introduction

The 'Nanny State' is a term that is usually used in a pejorative way to discourage governments from introducing legislation or regulation that might undermine the power or actions of industry or individuals. According to Daube "The nanny state was born in a 1965 column by Quoodle in the British weekly, *The Spectator*".³ The term 'nanny state' is viewed by some as actions of governments that are overprotective or interfere unnecessarily with individual choice. It is used effectively by industry for their own purposes to frame government as the 'Nanny' in preventing wayward children from having the freedom to act in a way that they believe should have no interference. It is a term that is used alongside demands for 'slashing red tape' and reducing regulation. As an extension of the aspect of control, the term nanny is associated with a sense of puritanism and restriction of enjoyable actions. Nanny statism is associated with the wowsers^c, the teetotalers and the fun police.

The Honourable Andrew Robb AO, Minister for Trade in the conservative Australian government, is quoted when he was in opposition, explaining the context of the Nanny State in his philosophy:

It is the difference between a nanny-state 'government knows best' approach, compared with the personal dignity and control that comes from the freedom to make your own choices while taking responsibility for those choices.⁴

and later,

*As a government the Coalition is committed to living within its means, reversing the nanny state, backing our strengths and restoring a sense of personal responsibility. It is true that in isolation these sound like little more than slogans, but in combination they present a powerful set of markers, the ballast of which guide the direction a Coalition government would take the country.*⁵

The 'anti-nanny state' approach was perhaps most clearly set out by Kerr, who has worked for both the right wing Institute of Public Affairs (IPA) and the Australian newspaper. In an article for the IPA before the recent Australian Federal election Kerr, having quoted Andrew Robb, goes much further,

*The Nanny State is obsessed with talking down people. It tells them the views they hold and the way they live their lives are wrong. When governments talk down at people who are already down the social strata-or feel ignored or put-upon it fosters resentment. It builds a sense of marginalisation, the opposite of community. Nanny Statism may give its enthusiasts a sense of moral superiority and general worthiness. But everyone else finds it simply offensive.*⁶

^c According to the Australian Macquarie Dictionary, the word 'wowsers' is an Australian slang term attributed to John Norton (journalist and politician) with the pejorative meaning being prudish or a killjoy. It is popularly supposed to be an acronym of We Only Want Social Evils Remedied².

What Kerr fails to recognise is that people are constantly 'being talked down to'. They are 'put upon'. But it is not primarily by governments. It is by those who exploit people regardless of the impact on their health by deliberately choosing not to inform and not to provide genuine choice. If people are to be genuinely free they must have the where-withal, time, opportunity and support to make real and informed choices. Making genuine choices means moving from the narrow sense of individual freedoms (and one which favours 'free enterprise' and money making interests of big industry) to enabling individuals and populations freedom from domination, particularly as it pertains to the role of government. When the overwhelming messages coming from media use either subliminal or blatant persuasive techniques which leave little room for an alternative dialogue, the ability to make genuinely free choices is significantly impaired.

There is no clearer example than with the tobacco companies. Their product, when used as directed, will shorten the lives of the majority of people who use it and, in many cases, will cause considerable pain and suffering prior to death. Initially there was resistance to the 'Nanny State' 'telling' people that they should not smoke, with government programs originally targeted at 'assisting those who chose to give up smoking'. Big Tobacco continued to argue it was worthwhile smoking. Big Tobacco dominated thinking. It was not until governments around the world took the 'Nanny' role from Big Tobacco and started influencing thinking through restrictions, changes to regulation and increased taxation that harms from tobacco and smoking in developed countries began to reduce, although the tobacco industry has continued to promote and develop sales in developing countries. The rhetoric changed to a societal expectation of government to deliver a healthier society that is largely smoke-free. Yet Big Tobacco continues, where it can, to harness all the techniques it is allowed to muster to dominate the thinking of people that tobacco is 'cool' and smoking is worthwhile.

Nanny statism – interference or domination?

In a breakthrough philosophical insight presented in *Republicanism: A theory of freedom and government*¹ Pettit argues the issue of domination is the real issue in protection of freedoms, rather than the commonly understood concern about interference. He argues that relatively recent conservative thinking has conveniently adopted the notion of non-interference, which happens to provide them with the freedom to do as they wish even when it interferes with the freedoms of others.

If the notion of domination is examined it delivers freedom across society rather than allowing one sector protection from interference with the consequential interference in others' lives. He argues that the original American republicans believed in the notion of non-domination rather than the more recent idea of non-interference. For our purposes non-interference manifests itself in the slogan of the 'nanny state'. What would be the place of the nanny state, however, if the conceptualisation of freedom in political terms was based on the notion of non-domination?

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