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## English obesity policies: To govern and not to govern



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### ABSTRACT

Problem definitions constitute a crucial part of the policy process. In 2008 the Labour Government presented a plan to reduce the obesity prevalence in England. Only three years later the Conservative–Liberal Government introduced a plan on the same topic, which it presented as new and innovative. The aim of this study is to analyse the respective governments' problematisations of obesity and to identify similarities and differences. Despite the different hues of the two governments, the programmes are surprisingly similar. They seek to simultaneously govern and not to govern. They adhere to liberal ideals of individual choice and they also suggest initiatives that will lead people to choose certain behaviours. Both governments encourage the food and drink industry to support their policies voluntarily, rather than obliging them to do so, although Labour is somewhat more inclined to use statutory measures. The Conservative–Liberal plan does not represent many new ideas. The plans are characterised by the paradox that they convey both ideas and ideals about freedom of choice as well as about state interventions to influence people's choices, which could be seen as incompatible, but as the study shows in practice they are not.

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### 1. Introduction

In 2008 the Labour Government published a plan to reduce obesity in England [1]. Only three years later the newly elected Conservative–Liberal Government launched its own plan to replace that published by its predecessor, maintaining that: “Past efforts have not succeeded in turning the tide. We need a new way of looking at the issue” [2]. The Conservative–Liberal Government thus presented its policy as being radically different from the previous plan and used the word “new” 118 times. The plans introduced by the Labour and Conservative–Liberal Governments claim to rely on the same Foresight report on obesity [3] as their knowledge base.

In this paper, I analyse the content of the two plans and in particular, working from the assumption that the governments represent different ideologies, I examine whether they differ in the way they problematize the issue of obesity and how they use and differ from the Foresight report.

### 2. Theory

Problematisations or problem definitions are a crucial part of a political process, where politicians and others single out an issue as a political problem, define it, and suggest explanations as well as solutions [4,5].

The way one defines problems will often be in line with the political ideology or frame to which one adheres. As Kersh has phrased it: “much of the political discussion regarding obesity is centred on two “frames,” personal-responsibility and environmental, yielding very different sets of policy responses” [6]. In line with this the Foresight

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report divides interventions into those focusing on individual behaviours among people at risk and those focusing on changes in infrastructures, food provision and economic and regulatory incentives [3].

The governments behind the two obesity plans studied here claim to represent different political ideologies, on the one hand, social democracy, and on the other, conservative and liberal. The government in office in 2008 has been characterised as the New Labour and it differs from Old Labour in embracing more liberal ideas [7] and in presenting itself as less ideological and more pragmatic, as is signalled by the motto “what matters is what works”. Social Democrats generally tend to see individuals as more influenced by their environments than Liberals do, and they consider that the state is responsible for the wellbeing of its citizens.

The government in office in 2011 was a coalition between Conservatives and Liberals. Conservatives of the old school do, as do Social Democrats, consider people to be influenced by their environment and believe that the state has an obligation to help people to live a healthy life. Both Social Democrats and Conservatives tend to accept paternalistic reasons for limiting people’s freedom [7].

Most Liberals perceive individuals as independent and self-reliant and believe that they should have freedom to act as they wish. In general, the state should refrain from interfering in people’s lives [7]. Some Liberals see state intervention, such as providing education and health care, as justified if it helps people pursue their goals. All Liberals do, however, see state intervention as justified in situations where people cause harm to others, the so-called harm principle [8]. What counts as harm is contested, and some hold that burdening others economically, by using a tax- or insurance-financed health care system or by not contributing to the country’s economy, could be considered as harming others [9].

### 3. Methods and materials

The material analysed is two policy documents published by the respective governments [1,2] and the Foresight report [3]. One purpose of such documents is to make the government and its policy seem legitimate; another is typically to motivate different actors to implement the policy [10]. The explicitly stated target audience of the plans are professionals in the health sector. However, the rhetoric reveals that the authors had a wider audience in mind: the politically interested general public, who should be persuaded to adhere to the policy and get the impression that the governments took the issue seriously. Although the plans are not identical with actually performed policies they indicate what the politicians find legitimate to state, and wish to present as their policies, and thereby the plans to some extent set out directions for the implemented policy.

To identify the political problem definitions in English obesity policies, I analysed the two plans through repeated readings and through searches in the documents for words that could be linked to the topics addressed to ensure no information got lost. The questions I asked when reading the texts were: How is obesity framed or defined as a political problem? What causes are identified? Which solutions,

that is to say, which governing technologies, do the governments suggest? Who is held responsible for causes and solutions? Are there differences between the programmes, which could be related to the different political ideologies they represent?

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Why is obesity a political and not just a private problem?

The fact that the governments published policies on obesity clearly signalled their conviction that obesity is a phenomenon that must be dealt with politically and not just a private matter. The responsibility of the government to take care of the health of the population is not even mentioned, it seems to be taken for granted.

Both governments emphasise that the problem is serious. Labour writes: that “excess weight can genuinely be described as the most significant public and personal health challenge facing us today” [1]. The Conservative–Liberal Government is likewise concerned: “Overweight and obesity represent probably the most widespread threat to health and wellbeing in this country” [2]. They both use relatively dramatic language to describe obesity, using pathos as rhetoric means, see Table 1. Only the Labour Government uses the word epidemic: “Britain is in the grip of an epidemic” [1], while the Foresight report uses it frequently. This suggests that obesity is contagious and that it is an urgent issue [11,12]. Both plans use the metaphor “tide” about the increasing obesity prevalence, picturing it as almost unavoidable; and supposedly assuming that it is a tide that will not turn quickly.

The plans mention the same health consequences of obesity: type 2 diabetes, heart disease and cancer. One consequence of obesity, which has been highlighted by researchers, is stigmatisation of obese individuals [13–16]. None of the English plans nor the Foresight report reflects

**Table 1**  
Word counts of the obesity plans.

Word	Labour	Conservative–Liberal
New	67	118
Epidemic	7	0
Challenge	22	31
Tackl*	39	30
Stigma	2	1
Individual	74	55
Choice	37	41
Free/freedom	0	10
Vulnerable	1	2
Equal/Inequal	1	8
Class	5 (In one table)	0
Word count	19,000	18,700

*Note to table:* The table illustrates that dramatic words, which aim at evoking feelings of fear and urgency, are used frequently. Individuals and choice are often mentioned, however, only the Conservative–Liberal plan uses the words free and freedom. It also shows that words relating to social inequalities in health are infrequent. One could expect Labour to be pre-occupied by that issue. Stigma in relation to obesity is hardly mentioned and discrimination not at all. The plans are of similar length, making word counts relevant as an analytical tool.

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