

No need for nanny

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ABSTRACT

The term "nanny state" is regularly used to attack health groups or governments, especially by interest groups bereft of arguments and journalists in search of a cliché. It has become a special favourite of tobacco companies and their supporters. In the present work we argue that the term should be retired in favour of genuine debate on substantive issues.

The expression "nanny state" was born in a 1965 column by "Quoodle" in the British weekly, *The Spectator*.¹ Quoodle was Iain Macleod, who as Minister for Health smoked through a 1954 press conference to publicise the dangers of smoking.² Macleod died at age 57 of a heart attack.³ After Macleod coined the phrase, the term caught on; others promoted it, notably the conservative polemicist Auberon Waugh. Waugh, a smoker who opposed action on smoking and even wrote a book promoting its virtues,⁴ claimed that "we live in a nanny state where Nanny, far from being the gentle, indulgent, feckless old thing of Labour dreams, is a ferocious virago of Tory nightmares".⁵ He died of heart disease at 61.⁶

Tobacco companies and their allies love their nanny. The RJ Reynolds tobacco company complained in 1997 about "The concept of the Nanny State where government determines for its sheep-like citizens what is good for them, and what not".⁷ The Chairman of British American Tobacco was asked in 1999, "If you could give Tony Blair one piece of advice, what would it be?". He replied, "shed the nanny statism", describing a ban on tobacco sports sponsorship as "pure nanny statism".⁸ Opposing tobacco legislation, US Senator John Ashcroft commented in 1998 "The Nanny State has opened a crusade to take over the life of any American who uses tobacco...".⁹

Cigarette company supporters suggest that tobacco is simply the first of nanny's dominos. The Cato Institute argued in the late 1990s, "There can be no doubt that tobacco is only the first in a long list of products from which the nanny state will protect us. What comes next—coffee, soft drinks, red meat, dairy products, sugar, fast food, automobiles, sporting goods? The list is endless, and the fear of repression is not mere paranoia".¹⁰

A 1997 book by two American academics entitled *Cancerscam: the diversion of federal cancer funds to politics* condemns "self appointed national nannies", "the national nannies", "the nanny network" and the "nanny state", defined as "a system that treats citizens more like children than adults"¹¹ (the same authors stayed loyal to their nanny with a 1999 volume entitled *The food & drink police: America's nannies, busybodies & petty tyrants*).¹² *Cancerscam* was funded to the tune of

US\$100 000 by the RJ Reynolds tobacco company, which named it "Project ASSIST".¹³

The tobacco industry-funded Freedom Organisation for the Right to Enjoy Smoking (FOREST) in the UK, clings to its nanny, describing curbs on tobacco displays as "more nanny state nonsense". FOREST organised an event at the 2007 Conservative Party conference entitled, "Nanny State? No thanks".¹⁴

A 7 December 1998 British Tobacco Merchants' Association media release argues that a government white paper on tobacco control reflects "the unacceptable face of the Nanny State" (the cynic might wonder what they see as the acceptable face).¹⁵

The drinks industry, which shares many concerns with its tobacco colleagues, also loves its nanny. The Australian Hotels Association has been a strong supporter of tobacco interests, opposing the tidal wave of bans on smoking in pubs and clubs that is sweeping through Australia. Its spokespeople in New South Wales speak of "the rise of wowserism and the nanny-state mentality..."¹⁶ (wowser being an Australian term for a killjoy), asserting, "We can't maintain this nanny state mentality".¹⁷ Its Western Australian Director, Bradley Woods, works two clichés into three words: "there is a sort of 1950s drinking mentality that the nanny state wowsers would have...".¹⁸ Meanwhile, for the Distilled Spirits Industry Council of Australia a new drinking guideline "makes people think they're living in a nanny state".¹⁹ The American Medical Association notes that "lawmakers attempting to target alcohol companies with tax increases or other regulatory initiatives are quickly labelled "neo-prohibitionists" or interfering "nannies".²⁰

Defenders of advertising freedom love their nanny. The Institute of Public Affairs (Australia) opposed curbs on alcohol advertising and Australian Medical Association proposals to limit junk food advertising to children in a media release entitled, "Nanny State ad bans won't stop kids liking junk food".²¹

Nanny is bipartisan. For the right, she represents State intrusion into freedom of choice for the individual and of action by industry (although the right generally seeks tougher action in areas like crime and illicit drugs). The left perceive a "Conservative nanny state" with global threats by governments "intervening to ensure that money flows from those at the middle and bottom to those at the top", and rolling back hard-won rights.²²

Columnists and commentators love their nannies. One Australian columnist recently asked his readers, "Is nanny always right? No day passes without there being either a new health scare or a

new measure announced to improve our health, or make our lifestyles healthier".²³ Another opposed road safety policy proposals in a piece entitled "Wowser speed nannies exceed limits of reason", criticising "Nanny State governments".²⁴

When Australia's Prime Minister Kevin Rudd moved to curb teenage binge drinking, a commentator in the *Hobart Mercury* wrote, "The nanny state is back. A sense of moral panic is being constantly created and fuelled by opportunistic and knee-jerk politicians, churches and vigilante morals campaigners".²⁵ A journalist in a national newspaper similarly relied on nanny to justify her criticisms, even writing of Rudd's time as a diplomat in Sweden, "Some might say that was very good preparation for a Labor prime minister of nanny-like disposition", calling him "our super-nanny Prime Minister".²⁶

There is nothing new about demonising and slogans in opposing public health measures.

In 1854, when Edwin Chadwick pressed for basic sanitation, the *London Times* thundered, "We prefer to take our chances of cholera and the rest than be bullied into health by Mr. Chadwick".²⁷ In 1983, when a tobacco advertising ban was debated in Western Australia, a Parliamentarian claimed that, "The people of Nazi Germany were sheer amateurs compared with the Government in what it is trying to do here".²⁸ Some commentators even talk of "health Nazis"; a silly term that is needlessly offensive to those only one generation removed from the Holocaust.²⁹⁻³⁰ The "nanny state" is an easy phrase in the same tradition.

Governments have legislated for millennia to protect communities and control the lives of populations in myriad ways, from taxation to policing. Public health legislation was a high priority for our early administrations, commencing, for example, in Western Australia with an 1842 Act restricting the slaughter of livestock within town sites—but there is no record of opposition to this as the start of a nanny (or maybe nanny goat) state.³¹

The most virulent opponents of governmental action to protect our health are companies that spend billions of dollars on sophisticated advertising, promotion, public relations and lobbying campaigns influencing adults and children to smoke, drink and eat junk foods.

If tobacco companies or the drinks industry had been contemporaries of Moses, they might have argued that the ten commandments represented gross intrusion by the "nanny deity", with as much credibility as their arguments against measures to protect the community from the consequences of smoking or alcohol. The nanny state provides them and some commentators with a ready-made slogan.

There are legitimate debates to be had about legislation, taxation, public education and other approaches to protecting the public's health. But they should focus on the issues, not on slogans and clichés. It's time for nanny to retire.

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