

Litmus test: the UK obesity strategy and government intervention

Blog post by Adviser Leo Ringer, 18 August 2016

On school exam results day, in mid-August, while politicians relax on holiday and the Olympic Games dominates headlines, the UK Government has published its long-awaited strategy for tackling childhood obesity. The eyebrow-raising timing is explained by the fact that the majority of the more muscular interventions under discussion, and long hoped for by the health community, have been dropped. While the debate about obesity will rage on, the plan and its communication give us an early insight into the calculus of Theresa May and her new administration.

Obesity is one of a number of classic and permanent cross-cutting policy challenges - like pensions, climate change or skills - where the range of policy levers will never fall under one departmental roof. In these instances, the delivery of something truly comprehensive requires the prime minister to give clear direction to squabbling secretaries of state - May has not taken the opportunity to show she can deliver this.

The industry-friendly strategy jars with the more interventionist, vested interest tackling approach to business outlined in May's launch speech earlier this summer. This was an opportunity for the prime minister to credential her commitment that "our actions will be bold", but critics of the plan will be quick to turn these words back on her.

The strategy was also an early test of May's appetite to mark a discontinuity with the Cameron administration. Instead, the plan reads much like a reheated version of the one put on ice over the referendum and is released under the auspices of the same health secretary. In particular, the salience of the re-announced soft drinks levy is a definitive statement of continuity.

The reference to "economic realities" as a constraining factor within the strategy reveals the government's sensitivity to the growth implications of a more interventionist public policy approach. Along with the need to address stinging criticism of the plan's delay, this industrial sensitivity provides the strongest explanation for the limited ambition it contains.

This is instructive as to how the government regards the relative priorities of social reform and economic growth in a post-referendum Britain. Ahead of what will be a concerning economic forecast from the Office for Budget Responsibility in late autumn, the government is clearly conscious of potentially shaving down GDP growth in pursuit of non-economic goals.

Whether government will return to the particular issue of obesity remains to be seen. The plan's promise to be "the start of a conversation, rather than the final word" is designed to allay fears that reform stops here, but today's overwhelmingly negative coverage suggests that this message

has failed to convince. While a second attempt at an overall strategy is unlikely, this open door provides permission for reform to be tacked-on throughout the parliament.

But until the new administration deepens its articulation of what its new approach to “industrial strategy” means, plans like the obesity strategy will be regarded as the de facto expression of the government’s overall intention. In the absence of anything firmer, broader industry onlookers will see today’s development as an invitation to lobby aggressively for the status quo and for policy cans to be kicked down the road.