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A B S T R A C T

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 preoccupied 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.

a perception that this is an important problem. Stigmatisation is barely mentioned.

The governments mention as a problem the fact that there are social inequalities in the prevalence of obesity. Neither government, however, writes much about these inequalities, though, the Conservative–Liberal Government writes quite a bit more than the Labour Government. It states: "it is vital that action on obesity reduces health inequalities" [2]. See Table 1. There is much less focus on social inequalities in Labour's obesity plan than in its general public health plan from 2004 [17]. The Foresight report likewise only briefly mentions social inequalities in obesity [3].

Costs caused by obesity are mentioned by the plans as a major reason for action. Labour claims that the costs "will be massive" [1]. The Conservative–Liberal Government is even more dramatic, tying obesity to the state of the nation as a whole: "Overweight and obesity are a threat to the economic growth on which the country's future prosperity and wellbeing depend" [2]. The Foresight report mentions the economic consequences before health and well-being effects of obesity, indicating that economy is a central concern among English researchers as well as politicians. Focus on the consequences of obesity for the economy is more pronounced in the Conservative–Liberal plan. The fact that Labour's plan was published before the onset of the financial crisis might be one of the reasons for this difference. The Conservative–Liberal Government writes: "At a time when the country need to rebuild our economy, overweight ad obesity impair the productivity of individuals and increases absenteeism" [2].

The argument that obesity causes individual suffering, such as poor health, could be seen as a paternalistic argument for interfering, where the state acts as a benevolent father to its citizens through removing their misery. While the notion that obese people burden the economy evokes the liberal harm principle, interpreted broadly as a reason for acting politically. Obese people harm their fellow citizens because they do not contribute as much as they could to the wealth of the nation and burden them by using the health care system more than others.

4.1.1. Bad choices and bad environments

Both plans point to people's choices *and* to the environments' influence on these choices as causes of obesity. The Conservative–Liberal plan states: "Each of us is ultimately responsible for our health" [2].

Somewhat more surprising, perhaps, the Labour plan also emphasises individual responsibility, noting that: "maintaining a healthy weight must be the responsibility of individuals first" [1].

However, the Labour plan also stresses, that "much of what drives individual choice on food and physical activity is influenced by modern society" [1]. According to the plan, the immediate environment impacts people's behaviour: "It is harder to make healthy choices where others in the family or community are also maintaining unhealthy behaviours" [1]. Interestingly, the Conservative–Liberal plan presents a parallel view: "The choices we make are influenced – perhaps more than we realise – by the day-to-day pressures we face, the behaviour of those around

us, the sort of neighbourhood we live in and the prevailing culture relating to food and physical activity which favours overconsumption and inactivity" [2]. This focus on how people's behaviours are shaped by an 'obesogenic' environment is in line with the Foresight report which claims that obesity is "not a matter of personal choice"; it "arises primarily from a systematic shift in the wider environment" [3]. The analysis of causes thus seems inspired by the report.

The plans hold that it is the individual's responsibility that she or he is obese, while simultaneously stating that individual choice is not unfettered. Stated differently, both plans adhere to the idea that people's behaviour are determined by their environments, and simultaneously claim that their choices are their own responsibility. While the idea of individual responsibility seems to be normative, people ought to act responsibly, the idea about the role of the environment seems rather to state a fact.

4.1.2. To intervene and not to intervene

The interventions suggested in the two plans are the same: they aim at changing people's behaviours through providing information as well as by changing the social and physical environments. When it comes to the environments the plans point at the same interventions promoting active travel, improve access to physical activity using planning systems, improve food choices etc. Information is seen as a crucial means to influence behaviours. The Labour Government "is to give people the information and opportunity to make the *right choices* for themselves and their families" [1]. The Conservative–Liberal Government will "transform the environment so that it is less inhibiting to healthy lifestyles, to provide the information and practical support we need to make *healthier choices*" [2]. (My italics SV.) With this governments are to support specific behaviours and change the environment to promote specific behavioural change aim at directing people's choices, rather than let the individuals themselves define what are the right or healthy choices for them. Both governments, holding that environments influence people's choices, wish to make people behave differently by changing their environment. In reality, this means affecting people without them necessarily being aware that they are being influenced. With these interventions, the governments disregard individual freedom of choice for the sake of helping individuals and the country as a whole.

Contradicting these ideas, the governments also state that they should not tell people how to behave. Labour: "Success will not lie in the Government taking a heavy-handed approach, dictating what people should eat and how active they should be" [1]. Conservative–Liberal: "we will favour interventions that equip people to make the best possible choices for themselves, rather than removing choice or compelling change" [2].

The Labour Government emphasises "enabling individuals", and the Conservative–Liberal plan "empowering individuals"; it is presumably the same activity they refer to, although none of them states clearly what they mean by it. However, what is clear is that what people

must be enabled or empowered to do by the help of the government is to make "better choices" [2], according to standards defined by the government.

It is characteristic of both plans that while they adhere to ideals of individual responsibility and freedom from state intervention, they nevertheless suggest interventions aimed at making people behave in a way the governments find appropriate, through support, enablement and changed environments. They wish to govern and at the same time not to govern.

The governments picked different suggestions from the Foresight report; others were neglected in both plans. The Conservative–Liberal plan writes about a life course approach, as did the Foresight report. Labour takes up the Foresight-metaphor about obesity as the climate change of public health. They both put a great emphasis on information such as campaigns, labelling, while the Foresight report claimed that marketing campaigns have either undocumented or limited and sometimes opposite effect of the intended.

The Labour Government is more specific in its suggestions about what to do, although the areas they wish to intervene in are the same. This could indicate a higher commitment to the task.

The Conservative–Liberal plan was criticised by several public health experts i.a. for focusing too much on individual responsibility, for not banning trans fatty acids and introducing minimum price for alcohol, and for not demanding food labelling on products for children [18]. I have found no similar critique of the Labour plan although it only fulfilled the last of the listed demands.

4.2. Who should intervene?

The plans underline that citizens have a great responsibility. Labour writes that: "success lies in everyone in society playing a part in making and supporting healthier choices" [1]. The Conservative–Liberal Government uses 'we' to signal an inclusion and responsibilisation of the citizens in the efforts: "We need to be honest with ourselves and recognise that we need to make some changes to control our weight" [2]. The Labour plan refers to citizens as 'they'.

The plans accord a central role to the local authorities, but the Conservative–Liberal plan seems to do so more adamantly: "Our new approach recognises the major limitations of centrally directed and top-down approaches. It will instead empower local leaders and communities to make their own decisions, without interference from the centre" [2]. Whether citizens experience interventions from local authorities as less top-down than those from the central government is an open question. But the local leaders are given greater freedom to act. The plan does not, however, refrain from mentioning what the local authorities can do, namely: encourage active transport, provide better access to physical activities, ensure a healthier built environment, and work with local business and partners to increase healthy food options.

The Conservative–Liberal plan's assertion of the central role of local government could be seen as an effort to reduce

centralism and increase local democracy. It could also be seen as a means of avoiding taking responsibility.

When it comes to the role of the food and drink industry, both plans appeal almost exclusively to voluntary actions. Labour: "The Government expects companies in every food sector to demonstrate their commitment by pledging action to promote healthy eating" [1]. The Conservative–Liberal Government "sees business taking a leading role in view of the food and drink industry's reach and influence on our diet" [2]. However, the Labour Government states that it will "examine the case for a mandatory approach where this might produce greater benefits" [1]; thereby signalling possible government interventions.

The Labour Government launched a "Healthy Food Code of Good Practice, in partnership with the food and drink industry" [1], while the Conservative–Liberal government introduced a "Responsibility Deal Food Network to harness the contribution of the food and drink industry as a force for good" [2]. The code and the deal had the purpose of committing the food and drink industry to voluntarily promoting healthier behaviours in the population. This should take place i.a. through information, labelling and health promotion at the workplaces.

The Governments stress that promoting employees' health will benefit employers through a healthier work force, with less absenteeism and higher productivity.

The Conservative–Liberal plan is reluctant when it comes to regulating industry, also in relation to children: "We need particular care in the way we balance protection of children with freedom of choice in relation to marketing and promotion of food" [2]. The Labour plan seems to be more prepared to regulate private industry, at least in relation to children, proudly claiming that: "England is considered to be global a leader for its introduction of both front-of-pack food labelling and broadcast advertising restrictions on food products high in fat, salt and sugar within programmes targeted children" [1].

The Conservative–Liberal Government plans to invest an extra £14 million in Change4Life, a social marketing programme developed to address obesity, during 2011–2012, while the Labour Government declared that it would use £372 million "for promoting the achievement and maintenance of healthy weight over the period 2008–11" [1]. In both cases the amounts are small compared with the total English health budget of more than £100 billion a year, especially when considering how serious a problem the governments claim obesity to be. In their plans, the governments point to other initiatives they have financed that also aim at reducing obesity.

The Foresight report suggests "interventions to prevent obesity will have to take place when the evidence is neither complete nor perfect" [3]. The politicians seemed reluctant to follow that advice; they ask for more evidence and suggest few radical changes in the environments and focus on areas where citizens shall choose to change behaviour. This is contrary to the Foresight report, which states that the "best current scientific advice suggests that solutions will not be found in exhortations for greater individual responsibility" [3].

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5. Discussion

The analysis points to a fundamental paradox in the two obesity plans. The governments, which would be supposed to have different ideological colour, have the same, ideologically conflicting, goals. They seek to take care of people by guiding their actions and changing their environment, but they also want people themselves decide what to do. They thus combine paternalistic concerns with liberal ideals about non-interference, which are in principle incompatible; nevertheless, when it comes to real world politics, they are clearly not.

The analysis shows differences between the plans, when it comes to considering state intervention towards businesses, a possibility only Labour mentions. Labour is also more specific in its suggestions about what to do and plans to use more money than the Conservative–Liberal Government. The latter focuses more on social inequalities, which is less expected than its reluctance to intervene towards industry.

However, the similarities between the plans are striking in most aspects analysed. The Labour plan resembles the Conservative–Liberal plan more than the plan launched by the social democratic Scottish government in 2010 [19]. What could be the reasons behind these similarities? One could be that those writing the obesity programmes and the politicians endorsing them could be seen as members of the same "'epistemic communities' of elites with shared ideas" [20]. The politicians and civil servants in England producing the two programmes claimed to rely on the same knowledge production, the Foresight report, although they did not always follow the advice given, and as the analysis has shown, their way of deliberating contains many similarities.

One could ask why the governments do not propose more interventions in the environment. Is it because they find influencing individuals' behaviours more appropriate, that the opposition from industry and other stakeholders was strong, that some of them could be costly or that the Foresight report could not point at many interventions with documented effect, neither those addressing individuals or those changing environments?

The current versions of the political ideologies in England and the fact that the Conservative–Liberal government is a coalition may also have contributed to creating a similar thinking. New Labour is more liberal than Old Labour and the Conservative–Liberal Government also endorses, conservative, ideas about an active role of the state. Another reason for the similarities when it comes to ideologies and policies could be a certain tendency, also seen in other countries, of politicians following the stream rather than acting as leaders. Or stated differently, they suggest policies that they assume the public approve of. An example of the inclination to listen to and involve the public, or parts of it, in the policymaking was seen when the Labour Government initiated a consultation process before writing the general public health programme, asking about 200 experts and the general public, where fewer than 2000 contributed [17].

Whether the similarities between the policies are as considerable when it comes to their implementation and long-term effects of the plans remains to be studied. Jebb et al. have described policy actions and studied possible effects of the two programmes and conclude that, to date, there is limited evidence of tangible effects [21].

Nonetheless, the programmes point in similar ways at minor solutions to what is claimed to be a major problem. The analysis reveals a specific English rhetoric and understanding of obesity, which may inspire reflections on causes and consequences of the problematisation. The purpose of the plans seems to be to demonstrate the commitment of the governments rather than actually fundamentally address the alleged serious problem of obesity.

Conflict of interest statement

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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