

'Parental Socialism'

Regulators tiptoe into the candy store

Julie Novak

To a large extent, the end of the Cold War effectively signalled the vindication of classical liberal philosophy's view that economies and societies organised on socialist principles are incapable of providing decent living standards and a humane quality of life for their citizens. However, there remains a puzzle as to why there remains a fervour amongst sections of the community for collectivist solutions to resolve complex economic and social problems, including in developed countries organised on the basis of economic markets and social liberties underpinned by the rule of law.

For example, in Australia, in the last 40 years, the amount of public expenditure (Commonwealth and State governments combined), as a proportion of economic output has grown

from 27.6 per cent to 43.6 per cent, with seemingly no effective brakes in place to prevent a further increase in the public sector's share of the economy.

In a recent paper, 'Afraid to be free: Dependency as desideratum' in the journal, *Public Choice*, the Nobel Prize-winning economist James Buchanan identified a strain of 'parental socialism' in modern society, where individuals invite the government to impose collectivist solutions on their behalf, in an effort to provide security from economic and social risks. Further, Buchanan considered that 'parental socialism' is on the increase. According to Buchanan, '[t]hat gloomy prospect looms, not because socialism is more efficient or more just, but because ... [p]eople are afraid to be free; the state stands in loco parentis'.

He expresses alarm that:

the source for extension in collective or state control here is 'bottom up' rather than 'top down', as with paternalism. Persons who

are afraid to take on individual responsibility that necessarily goes with liberty demand that the state fill the parental role in their lives.... they seek order rather than uncertainty, and order comes at an opportunity cost they seem willing to bear.

With the values of autonomy and self responsibility seemingly losing their appeal, Buchanan suggests that the 'learned helplessness' acquired by living in a political culture of preferential treatment and protection from ourselves may have left individuals incapable of accepting the responsibilities of freedom. Indeed, the shift towards 'parental socialism', where people are 'afraid to be free', is, according to Buchanan, the most dangerous threat to economic, political and social freedom in the modern era, and represents an alarming twist on the more conventional notions of socialism that emphasise top down economic and social controls.

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Only the government is capable of making this judgement

Regulatory manifestations of 'parental socialism': The case of obesity

There is good reason to suggest that 'parental socialism' is on the march in Australia, with some commentators noting that the growth in regulation has been driven by the demands from various sectional interest groups for the elimination of (or at least protection from the adverse effects of) various risks.

For example, one of the seemingly new frontiers in the debate over regulatory control relates to the prevention of childhood obesity. Various nutritional activists have argued for an array of regulatory interventions, including banning of 'junk foods' and soft drinks in school canteens and school vending machines, banning the display of selected foods and beverages near supermarket checkout points, restrictions on television advertising of 'junk foods', nutrition labelling at chain restaurants, 'fat taxes' on food producers, and additional physical education requirements in schools. Indeed, some of these regulatory measures have already been implemented in an effort to appease these lobby groups.

In many instances, the new 'war on obesity' is being fought by imposing restrictions on producers. Effectively, producers are being held responsible for the consumption decisions by individual consumers, and are penalised if their products are deemed to have been used excessively.

According to feminist Adele Horin, parents 'don't have the energy, the education, the time or the means' to reduce the extent of obesity in their own children, and '[w]e need more help from government to counter the corporate culture that flogs fatty food'.

However, this premise of 'victimhood' on the part of consumers ignores the fact that these types of regulations ignore individual responsibility altogether—indeed, no company forces people to eat their food or drinks. However, the nutritional activists are creating a misguided impression that

food producers and providers are somehow destroying individual responsibility, and that individual consumers are not responsible for their own health and eating habits.

The implementation of the measures outlined above therefore represents a dramatic and unwelcome step towards realising 'parental socialism', especially given that what we choose to eat and drink is perhaps one of the

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most private and intimate decisions that we make each day.

Buchanan's central thesis is that the forces of socialism may be extended through the twenty first century unless the polity's addiction to 'parental socialism' is palliated. There is a need for the proponents of classical liberalism to therefore become more pro-active in making the case for reversing this trend. A key to this is to recognise the longstanding liberal precept that individual liberty is complemented by self responsibility and self reliance, ensuring that individual action is aligned to considered intentions.

In 1960, Friedrich Hayek famously wrote that 'the belief in individual responsibility ... has always been strong, when people firmly believed in individual freedom'. Consistent with this, classical liberals have a role in remind-

ing people that our freedom to make decisions, and to take responsibility for these, is character building, and helps us to develop our own capabilities and paths as functional, self confident adults.

Through a process of socialisation by our families and schools spanning the first eighteen years of our lives, we have already been sufficiently equipped with the means to choose between the right and wrong alternatives in our lives.

Any moves by the state to promote 'parental socialism' effectively reduces otherwise fair minded and rational people to a childlike position of dependence on the next move by regulators. Parental socialists' attempts to spare our future selves the cost of our present choices effectively displace a rich variety of mechanisms for individual action that matches the variety of risk profiles and time discount rates we find among members of a diverse society.

Our innate human frailties, and our freedom to make bad choices which might make us unhappy and diminish our economic and social prospects in the short run, are as vital and precious as the choices that bring us joy and riches, as they provide important signals for what works, and what doesn't, in our lives. No amount of regulatory posturing by a parental state can displace the importance of institutions such as free markets and civil society in both preserving and affirming the self determination and autonomy of and sense of responsibility within individuals.

Government must be small and circumspect if society is to avert the tendency towards 'parental socialism', and thus enable us to continue to enjoy a concurrently high degree of liberty and individual responsibility.

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