

THE POLITICS OF PATRONAGE



Here is the irony. I've spent the best part of the last year arguing for taxes on saturated fats, sugar and salt, and I could barely get any part of the press to take an interest. Then, one weekend in Portugal and everyone in the press wanted to talk about obesity, 'fat taxes' and double standards.

The ingredient that brought about this transformation was McDonald's sponsorship of the Parliamentary football team's match against the Portuguese parliament at the start of Euro 2004.

At one level, the visit was no different from other matches MPs have played against different parliaments in Hungary, Germany, Ireland, Russia and the Czech Republic. In each match MPs have also raised around £20,000 for children's charities. Euro 2004 gave an extra focus to the visit but, since MPs paid for their own tickets to Euro 2004

matches, the central issue revolved around corporate sponsorship in general and McDonald's in particular.

McDonald's may be the official sponsors of the England team, the Football Association and Euro 2004, but there is an inseparable link between the fast food industry and obesity problems. So where do you draw the line on acceptable sponsorship? My own line has always been the arms trade, nuclear power and tobacco. I accept this is a personal rather than a theological position. The fast-food, snacks and confection industries come into a category of challenge rather than boycott – even though McDonald's sponsorship raises issues that go beyond obesity and into its environmental record and the absence of trade union recognition.

In general, McDonald's and any other sponsor paying huge amounts into sports sponsorship simply don't pay enough tax. This is not to knock McDonald's training of 10,000 sports coaches for schools and communities. Nor does it dismiss the sports equipment and amenities they give to local areas. I would just prefer that this came through public funding rather than corporate patronage.

At this point McDonald's (and others) make an important challenge. "OK" they say, "if we stop funding sport will the government take over?" It's a fair question. Today's political consensus says that tax payers would not vote for public investment and that private sponsors must fill the gap. It is our job to challenge this. For the Chancellor, the consensus allows him to get all such spending 'off balance sheet'. We all then become hostages to corporate patronage which, in turn, demands light touch corporate taxation.

It need not be like this. In France, twenty years ago, the Mitterrand government instructed municipalities to buy land and build sports stadia. They then set up a national sports coaching system to promote the work in localities. Everything came from general taxation, untouched by private sponsorship.

Sponsors invariably bring their own range of unacceptable activities. Banks that have closed down rural services, credit companies that encourage burgeoning personal debt, pension funds that have

squandered workers' life savings in speculative stock market activities, all underpin so many of the new 'partnership' arrangements that government promotes. It not only puts government in hock to private patronage but it also erodes the democratic base of our society.

People no longer see themselves as having rights, (as citizens) to public funding for community services. Instead, we have all become supplicants. Schools, communities and even local authorities are encouraged to seek private sponsors for public services. This is not the construction of a modern democracy but a retreat into relationships that are more feudal in character.

Back at McDonald's they know that the whole of the fast-food and processed-food industry is going to face heavy taxes (or penalties) for the over use of saturated fats, sugars and salt in their products. They know, too, that they will have to address local food sourcing, to avoid food-miles taxation (that I think will come next) and to meet consumer demands for food accountability. The irresistible force that will drive this will be public demand rather than parliamentary leadership. Politically, my job is to press this on both the fast-food industry and my own government.

It does not put me in the pocket of McDonald's or McLabour. I haven't eaten meat for 30 years and would prefer to eat my own shorts than anyone's beef burgers. It does not make me more of a friend to obesity than to sport. The real challenge is to create a different food culture and a different access agenda for sports and amenities within our society.

I joined the Slow Food Movement partly out of a recognition that in other parts of Europe (notably Italy) they actively promote food cultures based on local accountability, seasonal variability, low food-miles, fresh food choices, sustainable food systems and targeting food subsidies into the promotion of local and regional markets. All of this is achievable, but at odds with current obsessions with globalisation and exploitative markets.

I make no apology for my passion for sport. But I grew up in a world where we could play in the street, had access to local parks and youth clubs, and had schools whose playing fields had not been sold off to balance the education budget. McDonald's (and others) have filled a 'sports space' that governments have abandoned. Unless we have the political courage to fill this space differently then, one way or another, we are all burgered.