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From The Sunday Times

May 27, 2007

Pure nonsense about drink and babies

Minette Marrin

Respect. Empowerment. Personal responsibility. Independence. These are the words that new Labour spokesmen and women chant as the answer to every problem. Yet what they mean is precisely the opposite. Their true approach to the rest of us is one of disrespect, disempowerment, infantilisation and a growing dependence on the state.

What other conclusion can one draw, for example, from the government's dramatic announcement on Friday that women should henceforth not drink a single drop of alcohol during pregnancy for fear of harming their unborn babies?

That is untrue and the government knows it is untrue. There is no evidence that a tiny sip of wine or beer represents a risk to the foetus. And there is no evidence that there is anything dangerous about the existing cautious guidelines to pregnant women, according to which it is safe to drink a couple of units of alcohol a couple of times a week.

The Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists itself (which the government did not bother to consult on this matter) thinks it's quite safe. "It remains our advice," said a spokesman, "that one to two units once or twice a week is not harmful to baby or mother."

Nobody has any evidence that it is, not even the people who have issued this terrifying edict. Fiona Adshead, the government's deputy chief medical officer, admitted that while the new warning was meant to send "a strong signal to the thousands of [pregnant] women who drank more than the recommended limit", it was not in response to any new medical evidence.

Nonetheless the government wants a total abstinence warning to be put on alcohol labels and packaging. So a dire new government warning can be issued to bully and frighten pregnant women and burden the drinks industry, without any reason. Taxpayers fund this misinformation.

Meanwhile, realising that this new alarm is causing great anxiety to mothers who followed the existing guidance, or who (like me) followed the more indulgent guidelines before that, and fear we may have blighted our unborn babies' brains with an occasional glass of sauvignon blanc, the Department of Health has done a most undignified and unscientific somersault; it now, preposterously, reassures us that we haven't put our infants at risk. But if that is true, what can possibly be the purpose of the new zero alcohol scare?

Given that it's embarrassingly clear that the government issued a warning in the full knowledge that there is no scientific justification for it, one struggles for an explanation. It is hard to choose between conspiracy and cockup; perhaps it is a toxic mix of both.

This nonsense is a perfect paradigm of the new Labour mentality. In truth they see the public as idiots, who need simple messages, constant supervision and intervention. Scaring them is a good way of controlling them. It also provides work for idle bureaucratic hands so that apparatchiks can justify their jobs and pensions. What's more, bogus scare stories have a convenient way of obscuring real scare stories; images of drunken mummies and damaged babies can be relied on to distract us from the collapse of the NHS and Patricia Hewitt's personal via dolorosa as the humiliated secretary of state.

Dr Sheila Shribman, the government's maternity tsarina, says that "although there is still scientific uncertainty about the precise impact of excess alcohol" - and, one should add, what exactly an excess of alcohol is - "on unborn babies, we believe the time is right to introduce a strong consistent approach right across the UK". She and her people are worried about research showing that 9% of expectant mothers drink more than the recommended limit, and in old and new Labour-think one message must fit all. The figure might sound serious, although one should remember that some of this delinquent 9% drinks only a glass or two more a week than their more virtuous sisters.

And one should remember that there is always a sector of the population - at least 10% - which is unkindly called the underclass, and which suffers from a heavy concentration of all the worst social problems, including alcoholism. You would expect at least 9% of pregnant women to behave irresponsibly, one way or another.

However, the delinquency of a few pregnant women should not mean that the rest of us - 91% of us - ought to be treated like a nation of ninnies; there's no reason why the government should consider all of us too irresponsible to be trusted with the truth, too infantile to act wisely upon it,

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Minette Marrin is a journalist, broadcaster and fiction writer. She is a columnist for The Sunday Times, and has also written for The Spectator, The Asian Wall Street Journal, The Observer and The Literary Review. She regularly contributes to television and radio programmes

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anyway, and ignored by those who do, to submit the majority to the folly of the minority is the worst sort of old-fashioned socialist engineering - insulting, intrusive and worse than useless.

Not enough is known about the effects of alcohol on babies. People metabolise it differently and the risks vary between individuals, although it is not known how. Foetal alcohol syndrome is a disastrous result of heavy maternal drinking and alcoholic poisoning in the womb; it involves mental impairment and sometimes physical abnormalities. Fortunately it is comparatively rare. World Health Organisation figures suggest that one baby in a 1,000 is born with this condition worldwide, but populations vary hugely and it's anybody's guess what the proportion is in this country; there have been no studies.

The National Organisation for Fetal Alcohol Syndrome doesn't know what the number is and nor does the Department of Health; it doesn't collect figures. Nor does it collect figures on the much more nebulous and controversial condition called foetal alcohol spectrum disorder. In the face of all this uncertainty, the government is simply not in a position to offer advice, even supposing we wanted it or trusted it.

How about looking for some facts before leaping into an unnecessary new initiative? But that's not the new Labour way.

minette.marrin@sunday-times.co.uk

HAVE YOUR SAY

Ms Marrin you will probably never read these comments. You sound like the person who wouldn't. Your article is a nonsense and you know it. This piece was written purely in order to get a reaction. I will not give you the pleasure of one. Instead I suggest you reread your article and decide its purpose. Is it to tell us that Labour has created a nanny state? Because we already know that.

It is worth bearing in mind that what you are against is a well intended, positive advice. If you don't like it, ignore it. You do have the freedom to do so.

Victoria Nagy, London,

New Labour has allowed around the clock drinking by relaxing the licensing laws thereby creating mayhem in our towns and cities as drunken youths spill out of the pubs and clubs vomiting and fighting, amongst other things. The government has come under much criticism as a result, with suggestions that they are much too close to the brewers and distillers who are the beneficiaries of their largesse. With typical New Labour spin they seek to claw back some lost ground by showing that they are not entirely in thrall to the vintners and brewers etc. and that they really, truly care about the effects of alcohol on health. The result is this latest piece of flannel which (they assume)serves that purpose without New Labour having actually to do anything about the real problem they have created - uncontrolled and uncontrollable binge drinking by the young.

Brian Carroll, Hong Kong, China

22 years ago when I started having children, I was told not to drink a drop when I was pregnant. So I didn't, because it seemed like common sense. What short memories people have. Just because over the last 15 years some women have started swilling wine as if it were lemonade, that doesn't make alcohol any safer for a developing foetus. Why take the risk? The advice that a little is safe is far more dangerous than a blanket no, because we all know human beings are weak-willed and small glasses all too often turn into big ones, or it's 'oh, one extra won't do any harm'. Abstinence is a lot easier than self-control, and a lot safer too. But as Sue from Canada said below, making sacrifices is just too hard for some mothers.

Fiona Cummings, Edinburgh,

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