

Book Review - Digesting the message

Described by her detractors as "one of the top finger-waggers of the anti-food movement", Marion Nestle has put some of the adverse reactions to her book *Food Politics** on her website – responses which say almost as much as her original analysis about the nature of the problem facing anyone who is serious about tackling the obesity epidemic. In the USA the real debate pivots on political perspectives that are not remotely concerned with health but perpetuate the "nanny state" notion that any discussion about improving nutrition is inevitably a step towards eliminating all personal freedom.

Nestle received an attorney's letter making an apparently earnest threat of legal action on behalf of the Sugar Association Inc. It accused her of "defaming" the product. Apparently personal freedom should not extend suggesting that sugar can do any wrong. Nestle, Professor and Chair of the Department of Nutrition and Food Studies at New York University, sent a forthright response telling them to back off with the warning:

Growing evidence is linking excessive intakes of added sugars with undesirable health risks of obesity leading to increased incidence of type 2 diabetes mellitus and its complications, especially cardiovascular disease.

The public hectoring of 'targets' in the nutritional health field – and Nestle is the bullseye – is displayed on the website linked to the Center for Consumer Freedom. Lest there be any confusion this group "represents a coalition of restaurant operators and concerned individuals." It boasts that it monitors those it dubs as anti-consumer activists who are "not just attacking restaurants - they're attacking liberty." Man the barricades. Will fraternity and equality be next on the menu? Apparently consumers should not be free to suggest that fast food can do any harm.

In the context of the bearpit calibre of public debate in the USA, it must have

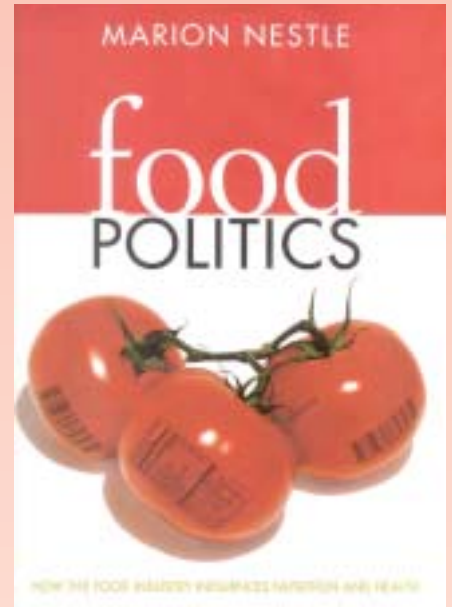
taken considerable courage to produce this scholarly exposé of the extent of the influence and involvement of the food industry in both the scientific field and the regulatory processes which are supposed to protect consumers' freedom to stay healthy. Nestle offers far greater depth than the recent popular American investigative writers who lifted the lid on 'Big Food' and discovered a can of worms; moreover her detailed insights provide an insider's perspective. As editor of the 1988 Surgeon General's Report on Nutrition and Health, she saw the workings of the Department of Health and Human Services close up as a policy adviser, and later sat on the advisory panels that drafted and revised the US dietary guidelines. She is remarkably candid about the dilemma that confronted her when she began working on the Surgeon General's report in the 80s and was warned off recommending lower intakes of fat and sugar.

The book charts meticulously the unequal struggle with an all powerful food sector able to buy political favour as well as the cosy "revolving door" relationship between the industry's lobbyists and officialdom. The lobbying business had a turnover of \$1.4 billion in 1998 and food accounts for a large slice. But the movement of industrial representatives to US Department of Agriculture posts and vice versa confirms a well-established symbiosis that can only nurture unhealthy suspicion. Nestle names names, and comments: "The practice of recruiting industry executives to government work raises questions of conflict of interest."

Some of the evidence has been aired before, but here it is pieced together like a jig-saw puzzle. It makes a depressing picture. It is ironic, she argues, that US price controls actually keep sugar prices artificially high, at a cost to consumers of

"My first day on the job, I was given the rules: no matter what the research indicated, the report could not recommend "eat less meat" as a way to reduce intake of saturated fat, nor could it suggest restrictions on intake of any other category of food."

"Obesity is now the most serious dietary problem affecting the health of American children. The blatant exploitation by food companies of even the youngest children raises questions about the degree to which society at large needs to be responsible for protecting children's health in a free-market economy."



\$1.9 billion in 1998. But the benefits flow to only a few with 42% of US sugar subsidies going to just 1% of growers, many of whom happen to be generous political benefactors. One well known family firm received \$60m in subsidies while making six figure donations to both political parties. Nestle describes how one member of the family hosted a \$1m fundraiser for former President Bill Clinton, and was able to get direct access to the President to discuss plans to tax sugar growers. The tax was never imposed. In this context, Nestle argues, it is understandable that no officials were prepared to take on the industry when the US dietary guidelines changed existing federal advice to limit to sugar intake to simply moderate consumption.

The explosion in childhood obesity is not acknowledged by the food industry as an issue for which they bear any real responsibility. Yet in 1997 American children got 50% of their calories from added fat and sugar. The diets of 45% of children failed to meet any of the serving recommendations in the Food Pyramid. Only 2% of Californian teenagers actually met the diet and activity recommendations. Small wonder then that Nestle questions how much society at large needs to be responsible for protecting children's health. She nevertheless clings optimistically to the hope that consumers themselves – given freedom of choice – may in the end be able to force a shift towards an equitable balance in food and health.

Neville Rigby

* *Food Politics* by Marion Nestle University of California Press. www.foodpolitics.com