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Planet-friendly diets: Time to embrace the nanny state?

Why the government should encourage people to eat low-meat, planet-friendly diets if it is serious about cutting greenhouse gas emissions.

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“...the worst sort of nanny state ever” was Climate Change Minister Claire Perry’s reaction to the suggestion that the government could encourage people to eat less meat.[1](#)

This knee-jerk response is trotted out whenever new analysis is released stressing the importance of eating less meat to help reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Yet this came in the wake of the latest global climate change report warning that we have just 12 years to get emissions in check.

The government is missing a trick not owning and encouraging behaviour-change strategies to help cut emissions from the food we eat.

And new research has found that [governments will have to step in](#) to help people go beyond the smaller, incremental actions they tend to choose if we are to seriously cut our emissions. Especially in tricky areas, like eating less meat, and flying less.

Climate change demands action on an unprecedented scale at all levels from political to personal. But Ministers are lagging when they should be leading.

Meat, dairy and climate change

Livestock production has a huge climate impact, responsible for 14.5% of global greenhouse gas emissions.[2](#)

Yes, there are ways to tinker with how animals are farmed to bring this down a bit. But it's inescapable that this has got to get personal.

The global Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change to the UK's Committee on Climate Change all agree – we just need to eat less meat [3](#).

But changing people's eating behaviour isn't simple. What we eat is influenced by our habits, culture, tastes and preferences and what's affordable and available at the time.

There are encouraging trends – an upsurge in flexitarianism (people reducing the amount of meat they eat) as well as an unprecedented rise in veganism, especially amongst young people.[4](#)

Concern over climate change is becoming an increasingly strong motivator, alongside health and animal welfare.

And the food industry is responding to these market signals: pioneering Veggie Pret stores are leading the way; supermarkets are falling over themselves to offer the latest meat-free ranges; Ikea is offering meatless meatballs; even KFC is concocting chicken-less nuggets.

The need for lifestyle change

But much more needs to be done.

Despite the recent trends, the majority of people are still in the dark about the links between meat and dairy production and climate change [5](#) and the urgent need to change our eating habits.

Experts agree there is a critical role for individual behaviour change to keep us within 1.5 targets set in Paris – from flying less and adopting electric cars to eating less meat.[6](#)

Lifestyles need to change radically. This change is needed at scale involving encouragement and a strong lead from government.

Polls show that people are responsive to government advice but they're not getting it explicitly enough.

Tentative efforts to advance strategies around reduced meat consumption have been siloed within government departments and repeatedly shelved. Fear of the reaction of the National Farmers Union was partly behind this.

But with the recent NFU announcement that agriculture should be net zero by 2040,[7](#) there are opportunities to promote meat reduction strategies – alongside support for quality, sustainable production like pasture fed.

Less and better meat is key.

How can the government take a lead?

Public awareness campaigns would be an important first step, but nowhere near enough.

Evidence shows that increased awareness doesn't automatically lead to behaviour change. There is often a gap between people's initial response and their willingness to take action (the value-action gap) when it comes to concern for the environment and individual behaviour.[8](#)

Government needs to create the right framework for farmers, the food industry, public sector schools, hospitals and care homes to change their practices and enable people to adopt healthy, lower-meat diets.

Crucially, they should roll out behaviour change programmes that encourage people along that path.

If they do this to help people cut down on food waste and eat less sugar – why not on meat?

Why we need more nannies

A scathing piece by public-health doctors recently accused those who cry 'nanny state' of using the term to shut down public debate over important societal issues.[9](#)

In the Climate Change Minister's case this is a serious own goal. We desperately need more, not less discussion, debate and action in society so we can galvanise collective action on climate change.

And here's the nub.

Research on social behaviour suggests lifestyle change can build momentum for systemic change.

According to Leor Hackel and Gregg Sparkman, postdoctoral scholars in psychology at Stanford University:

"Humans... use social cues to recognise emergencies. People don't spring into action just because they see smoke; they spring into action because they see others rushing in with water. The same principle applies to personal actions on climate change." [10](#)

It is in the government's interest, if it is serious about showing global leadership on climate change, to encourage individual behaviours that bring down emissions. But also to encourage a deeper engagement and support for the political action and societal change needed to address climate change.

And instead of fearing being branded as interfering Mary Poppins, Ministers should embrace the huge and multiple benefits of encouraging less and better meat diets.

Better for our health. Better for the NHS. Better for animal welfare.

And helping achieve a stable climate and flourishing environment for us all.

Notes

[1.\] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-45838997](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-45838997)

[2.http://www.fao.org/news/story/en/item/197623/icode/](http://www.fao.org/news/story/en/item/197623/icode/)

[3.https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/oct/10/huge-reduction-in-meat-eating-essential-to-avoid-climate-breakdown](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/oct/10/huge-reduction-in-meat-eating-essential-to-avoid-climate-breakdown)

[4.https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/oct/10/huge-reduction-in-meat-eating-essential-to-avoid-climate-breakdown](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/oct/10/huge-reduction-in-meat-eating-essential-to-avoid-climate-breakdown)

[5.](#)

https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/field/field_document/20141203LivestockClimateChangeForgottenSectorBaileyFroggattWellesl

[6.](#)For example, <https://www.drawdown.org/> and <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2015/11/changing-climate-changing-diets-pathways-lower-meat-consumption>

[7.https://www.nfuonline.com/updates-and-information/achieving-net-zero-meeting-the-climate-change-challenge/](https://www.nfuonline.com/updates-and-information/achieving-net-zero-meeting-the-climate-change-challenge/)

[8.https://www.jstor.org/stable/40574132?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/40574132?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents)

[9.https://blogs.bmj.com/bmj/2018/12/05/crying-nanny-state-is-a-way-of-crushing-sensible-public-discussion/](https://blogs.bmj.com/bmj/2018/12/05/crying-nanny-state-is-a-way-of-crushing-sensible-public-discussion/)

[10.https://slate.com/technology/2018/10/carbon-footprint-climate-change-personal-action-collective-action.html](https://slate.com/technology/2018/10/carbon-footprint-climate-change-personal-action-collective-action.html)