

Responses of New Zealand political parties to questions about obesity prevention

Introduction

On 5 September 2008 a letter was sent to all political parties represented in the current Parliament asking for their responses to four questions about issues related to reducing obesity in New Zealand. Replies were received from:

- The Green Party
- The Labour Party
- The Māori Party
- The National Party
- The Progressive Party
- UnitedFuture.

This report contains the responses from these six parties, presented in alphabetical order. No attempt has been made to evaluate the responses: this is left to the reader. However, background material on the questions (see Appendix) may be of help in interpreting what the responses mean in terms of commitment to some key policies for obesity prevention.

This document has been revised to include the response from the Labour Party received on 30 October.

General statements

Three parties supplied introductory statements intended to provide a context for their answers.

Māori: We agree that there needs to be action taken by the Government and health organisations in this area, as relying on the food and beverage industry to self regulate is not appropriate.

National: People make personal decisions every day that affect their health and well-being – eating, drinking, or exercising. Although these choices may be shaped by public health messages or cultural experiences, they are still choices that individuals are free to make.

Any effective long-term approach to addressing the health implications of lifestyle decisions must respect people's rights to make choices. It is unsustainable to take an approach that creates hostility by patronising people about how to live their lives. Instead, policy should engage people by

informing their understanding of the consequence of lifestyle decisions, and support them to make improvements.

National has already announced its intention to give schools additional resources to ensure more pupils can take part in extra-curricula organised sport, and we will ensure that more of the government's sport spending makes it through to the sports clubs on the front line.

Progressive: The Progressive Party, although it has no specific obesity policy, has a longstanding commitment to public health and to preventative medicine, and supports programmes which are effective against identified and significant public health problems.

Q1 Television advertising of foods and drinks to children

What is the position of your party on stopping the television advertising of energy-dense and nutrient-poor foods and drinks before 8.30pm?

Greens: Our policy is to prohibit the screening of television advertising of high salt, high fat, high sugar, nutrient-poor foods and drinks before 8.30pm. Children's eating habits are developed at an early age, and numerous studies have found that children's food choices are strongly influenced by television ads promoting unhealthy food. We agree with experts such as Professor Boyd Swinburn that one of the most effective ways of reducing the overwhelming pressures on children to consume unhealthy food would be to remove these ads on television before 8.30 at night.

Labour: Labour intends to continue working with industry on an accord that will see a guide developed for advertising food during children's television hours. There is agreement between Ministers and the Television Broadcasters Council that will see a Children's Food (CF) rating developed. Only foods with this rating will be allowed to advertise during programmes directed at children.

At this point in time we do not support banning advertising of energy dense and nutrient-poor foods and drinks before 8:30pm.

Māori: The Māori Party believes we need to get in line with our overseas counterparts on this issue. According to Otago University researchers at the Wellington School of Medicine, research shows that the number of food advertisements during children's viewing hours has gone up by 50% since 1997. In a recent Australian study, almost 90% of 400 parents questioned wanted greater government control in this area, and we'd expect a similarly high figure here. Expecting children to have rational or 'healthy' responses to advertising deliberately aimed at attracting them to high fat, high sugar, and high salt food is not only ridiculous, but completely unfair. Millions of dollars are spent targeting children and we believe it needs to stop, and we should follow the guidelines that have been successfully installed in Norway and Sweden, where no advertising is permitted during children's viewing hours.

National: We have no plans to change the current regulations of food and drink advertising.

Progressive: We have long considered that the rules governing advertising on television need to be tightened to ensure that those products and services known to have a negative effect on health and particularly the health of children can be more effectively regulated. This includes foodstuffs scientifically identified as having such effects. In parallel circumstances Progressive MP Matt Robson has sponsored a Private Members' Bill which would have imposed significant further regulation on liquor advertising, and we fully support further initiatives to restrict tobacco advertising.

UnitedFuture: UnitedFuture has always believed that if a product is legal then it should be able to be advertised. However, we are open to some regulations around the way foods like this are able to be promoted and would certainly be interested in looking at further information as to whether the restriction on when this food can be advertised is a helpful strategy or not and would make a consideration on a case by case basis of this.

Q2 Food labelling

What is the position of your party on the introduction into New Zealand of 'traffic light' symbols on food and drink labels indicating whether a product should be consumed regularly (green), moderately (amber), or only occasionally as a treat (red)?

Greens: The Green Party is committed to a traffic light labelling scheme which would enable consumers to readily distinguish health and unhealthy food. We received evidence, during the Health Select Committee Inquiry into Obesity and Type 2 Diabetes, that consumers take only a couple of seconds to decide whether or not to buy a product, and that they want easily accessible information to help them choose between healthy and unhealthy foods.

Labour: Through our Healthy Eating Healthy Action programme, we have introduced a food labelling system for schools and ECE centres to help them identify healthy food choices. This classifies foods into everyday, sometimes and occasional foods.

We have also been working with our Australian counterparts to investigate food and drink labelling to indicate how regularly they should be consumed. One of the options being discussed is the traffic light system. Labour supports further work in the area, but believes that any decision on labelling needs to be backed by strong evidence, which will require more investigation.

Māori: We would be in favour of such a system.

National: We have no plans to change the current regulations around food and drink labelling.

Progressive: The Progressive Party has generally supported food labelling requirements only in those circumstances in which there is a clear and present danger of harm and where it can be shown to be effective in dealing with an identified public health problem. We do not think that the proposal to put 'traffic light' information on food products has been shown to meet these criteria.

UnitedFuture: UnitedFuture thinks this could be a very helpful opportunity for consumers to get some very quick feedback, however I do think that there are many of us who would also like to see some of the current information on the number of calories, the fat content and sugar and salt content on products more specifically indicated so that we can plan our daily intake specifically as well.

Q3 Pricing mechanisms to influence food choices

What is the position of your party on the introduction into New Zealand of pricing mechanisms, such as subsidies or tax changes, to reduce the cost of foods and drinks that should be consumed regularly such as fruit and vegetables, and/or to increase the cost of foods and drinks that should be consumed only occasionally such as sugary drinks?

Greens: The Green Party is very concerned that healthy food is becoming unaffordable for many New Zealanders. However, after a great deal of deliberation we decided that taking GST off healthy food was not the most effective way to ensure affordability for those most in need, as the compliance costs would be high and there can be no guarantee that the savings will be passed on to consumers. Instead, we support an inquiry into the conduct of supermarkets, and the development of a code of conduct to ensure farmers, suppliers and consumers are treated fairly. We have also challenged Fonterra to decouple the price of their dairy products sold in New Zealand from the escalating price they can get on the global market. Alongside these initiatives we want the free fruit in schools programme extended to all schools, an expansion of the breakfasts in schools programme, and gardens in all primary schools so that children can be taught how to grow and cook food. We also want Government support for community gardens, and other initiatives to encourage people to grow their own food. We believe it is critical that the minimum wage is increased to at least \$15 an hour, that core benefits are lifted, that the first \$5000 of income is tax free, and a universal child benefit is introduced so that all families can afford healthy food. We also support a small levy on all soft drinks sold in New Zealand.

Our general approach to taxation is that we need a tax shift – to take taxes off things we want to see more of like productive enterprise and incomes, and shift those taxes onto things we want to reduce like waste, pollution and the use of scarce resources.

Labour: Labour believes that people should consume healthy food and drink as regularly as possible, but does not believe that subsidies or tax changes are the way to approach this. We do not support tax changes or subsidies on food because these would be unwieldy, difficult for consumers and difficult to implement. Furthermore, food prices are set internationally and to a large degree taxes or subsidies would have little effect when compared to fluctuating global food prices.

Our approach is to ensure that New Zealanders are well educated to make responsible and health choices about their food and drink, and exercise regularly. This is why we initiated, and will continue, various social marketing and information campaigns such as Mission On and Healthy Eating Healthy Action.

Māori: We have advocated for the GST to be removed from fruit and vegetables as we believe this commitment would have enormous health effects across the whole population. The Public Health Association has suggested the removal of GST from fruit, vegetables, bread and other cereals and milk is one way of responding to the long-standing health, educational and social disadvantage issues children are current suffering from and we agree, and will be campaigning very strongly on this issue.

National: Our priority is lowering personal tax rates and simplifying the tax system.

Progressive: The Progressive Party does not support this proposal. It would be cumbersome and complicated to administer, particularly in circumstances in which there was disagreement over the status of the food items in particular. Our preference is to direct resources to public health publicity and education campaigns encouraging a healthy diet. We believe that the teaching of nutrition and food preparation in schools needs to be re-emphasised as a core subject.

United Future: UnitedFuture doesn't have a current position on using pricing or tax mechanisms as a way of controlling the purchasing power of individuals although we acknowledged and supported the use of those mechanisms on products like alcohol and tobacco. We have not yet considered whether we are open to that as a strategy for better managing what people consume and would need to give that serious consideration in the future.

Q4 Active transport options

What is the position of your party on the introduction of government initiatives to make active transport options (walking, cycling and public transport) an easier choice than the private car for New Zealanders living in urban areas?

Greens: The Green Party has long campaigned for active transport, such as walking, cycling and public transport. We want a much greater share of transport funding going into making our cities safe for cycling and walking, and supporting walking school buses to get kids to school in a healthy way.

Labour: Labour supports initiatives to make active and shared transport options an easier option than the private car for New Zealanders living in urban areas. The recently released New Zealand Transport Strategy 2008 (NZTS 08, available on www.transport.govt.nz) sets firm targets for the New Zealand transport sector that support a shift to shared and active modes. Labour in government has committed over \$1.3 billion in funding for public transport, walking and cycling, demand management and community services over the next 3 years. These projects include electrifying and upgrading rail services, improving bus services, schemes such as the Walking School Buses, improved walking and cycling facilities and road safety education. We also introduced free off peak travel for Super Gold Card holders on all public transport services from 1 October to encourage more people to use shared modes in urban areas. Public Transport improvements focus on shared modes but have flow on impact for increased use of active modes.

Māori: This is certainly an area where the Government needs to play a greater role. Within the Māori Party, it is our aspiration to create clean, safe and healthy habits, prefaced on the development of cheap, free, regular, reliable and frequent public transport. These decisions have to be encouraged and facilitated by a Government that is willing to put its money where its mouth is when it comes to sustainability. Our party supports any policy initiatives for the rail infrastructure to deliver a better service and reduce the number of cars on the road. We are aware of various cities in Aotearoa where cycling networks have receive greater funding prominence, and subsequently the numbers of people jumping on their bikes has increased. We'd like to see these initiatives gain in number, as the demonstrate the changes that can be made when the direction is there.

National: Our transport policy recognises the importance of offering New Zealanders choice about their method of transport. Our party is supportive of making active transport options easier to access, and we will continue to support improvements such as integrated ticketing, cycleways, and making our cities pedestrian-friendly.

Progressive: The Progressive Party environment policy takes a firm stance on the need to encourage transport options other than private motor vehicles (walking, cycling, public transport) for both environmental and health reasons.

UnitedFuture: Facilitating options like walking, cycling and public transport is always a positive move for government to be taking and UnitedFuture would support all those initiatives that make it easier for New Zealanders to stay active.

Appendix: Background to the three food-related questions

This gives a brief background to the issues behind each of the three food-related questions asked of political parties in the current Parliament and contesting the 2008 General Election.

Q1: The advertising of unhealthy foods and drinks to children

Stopping or substantially restricting the advertising of unhealthy foods and drinks to children has the overwhelming support of groups and individuals across the health sector.¹ It also has support from a large majority of New Zealanders, as shown in two recent opinion surveys.²

After considering numerous submissions addressing this issue, a majority of the Health Select Committee recommended in 2007 that:

appropriate restrictions on the advertising, promotion and marketing of unhealthy food and drink to children be agreed urgently. For broadcast media we recommend an 8:30 pm watershed for advertising energy-dense products.³

The current government has chosen to rely on self-regulation by the television industry to make progress on this issue.

In May 2008 the New Zealand Television Broadcasters' Council (NZTBC) representing Television New Zealand, TV Works and Māori Television announced a voluntary food classification scheme for TV advertising to children. The guidelines, which place restrictions on when certain types of food can be advertised, apply to children's programming times on TV2, TV3 and Māori TV. On weekdays these times finish at 5pm on TV2, 4.30pm on TV3, and 6pm on Māori Television.

In the same month the Broadcasting Standards Authority released a report showing that three of the four most popular programmes for children screen outside these hours. This includes *The Simpsons* which is the programme most watched by children.⁴

¹ White, John (2007). The Health Select Committee Inquiry into Obesity and Type Two Diabetes in New Zealand: An initial analysis of submissions, Chapter 5. Available from www.foe.org.nz.

² White, John (2008). Freedom of choice and the Public Health Bill, p14. Available from www.foe.org.nz.

³ Inquiry into Obesity and Type 2 Diabetes in New Zealand: Report of the Health Committee. Presented to the House of Representatives, August 2007.

⁴ Broadcasting Standards Authority (2008). Seen and heard: Children's media use, exposure, and response. Available from <http://www.bsa.govt.nz/publications-pages/seenandheard.php>.

In announcing the initiative, NZTBC chairperson Brent Impey said that “the new Classification reflects the NZTBC’s desire to help address the obesity issue by reducing advertising exposure of certain foods that children would view within their programming times”.⁵ So NZTBC accepts that childhood obesity can be addressed by reducing children’s exposure to TV advertising. If self-regulation can do the job, as industry submissions on the Public Health Bill repeated claimed, why then does NZTBC not implement its classification scheme when children’s audiences are at their largest? The answer in the minds of many public health advocates is that the move had more to do with countering calls for regulation than with protecting children.

Q2: Traffic light symbols on food and drink packaging

Health advocacy groups in both New Zealand and Australia have been promoting the use of simple, easily understood symbols on the front of food packaging that indicate the contribution of the product to a healthy diet. There are several ways in which this might be implemented, including a single symbol indicating the overall healthiness of a product, multiple symbols indicating where the product rates with respect to components such as fats, sugars and salt, and combinations of both of these. The underlying concept is that consumers would be educated to recognise that green means more healthy or eat lots, amber means okay or eat moderately, and red means less healthy or eat only occasionally.

A majority of the Health Select Committee, in reporting on its Inquiry into Obesity and Type 2 Diabetes, recommended that a traffic light system or comparable food labelling system be implemented in New Zealand.

There is a growing body of research indicating that traffic light symbols are the most promising option for assisting shoppers in making more healthy food choices.^{6,7} The exact form that a traffic lights scheme might take requires further research, and this is currently being undertaken, including in New Zealand.

Food manufacturers, both in New Zealand and elsewhere, are vigorously opposed to introduction of traffic lights labels. In New Zealand and Australia a “percentage daily intake” (%DI) scheme is being promoted in what health advocates believe is an attempt to avoid traffic lights. There is substantial

⁵ Press release, NZTBC, 15 May 2008.

⁶ Lanumata et.al. (2008). *Front of pack labelling from the perspectives of Māori, Pacific and low-income New Zealanders*. Available from <http://www.otago.ac.nz/wsmhs/academic/dph/research/heppru/publications/Consumer%20report%20submitted%20FINAL.doc>.

⁷ Kelly, B et.al. (2008). *Front-of-pack food labelling: Traffic light labelling gets the green light*. Cancer Council: Sydney, 2008. Available from <http://www.cancercouncil.com.au/nutrition/foodlabellingreport>.

evidence that %DI is of little value to shoppers⁸ and is very inferior to traffic lights as a means of promoting more healthy food choices.⁹

Q3: Price incentives to encourage more healthy eating

More than a third of submissions to the Health Select Committee Inquiry into Obesity and Type 2 Diabetes advocated some form of price incentive to encourage more healthy eating, even though this was not referred to in the Terms of Reference.¹⁰ Proposals ranged from tax changes or subsidies to reduce the cost of more healthy food (e.g. remove GST) to changes that would increase the cost of less healthy food (e.g. excise tax on the fat or sugar content of foods). Some submitters saw a need for any increases in the price of less healthy food to be accompanied by decreases for more healthy food, or by some other mechanism to avoid increasing the cost of living for low-income groups.

Price incentives are seen by public health experts as potentially very powerful, and a key element in the mix of policies that will be required to reverse the obesity epidemic. Tax increases are credited with much of the decrease in tobacco use.

Tax changes to promote more healthy eating have wide ramifications, and would require input from tax experts before any proposal was selected for implementation. This work has not been done. For this reason the question was phrased to gauge support for price incentives in principle. The phrasing was not entirely successful, as there was still a tendency for answers to reflect current calls for GST to be removed from all food (mainly to combat poverty) or from fruit and vegetables (mainly to promote healthy eating).

⁸ Food Standards Australia New Zealand (2007). International literature review on percentage daily intake labelling. Available from <http://www.foodstandards.gov.au/standardsdevelopment/proposals/proposalp293nutritionhealthandrelatedclaims/p293preliminaryfinal3502.cfm>

⁹ Ledeman, J & Zipper, T (2006). How Daily Intake information pitfalls are likely to detract from usefulness and understanding of Nutrition Information Panels. Available from http://www.foodlegal.com.au/bulletin/article/2006-12/how_daily_intake_information_pitfalls_are_likely_to_detract_from_usefulness_and_understanding_of_nutrition_information_panels/.

¹⁰ White, John (2007). The Health Select Committee Inquiry into Obesity and Type Two Diabetes in New Zealand: An initial analysis of submissions, Chapter 6. Available From www.foe.org.nz.