



Slim chance of action

A courageous government could make a huge difference to the fight against obesity, write **Boyd Swinburn and Jane Martin.**

THE sound of the corporate Pied Pipers luring our children down the path of obesity with giveaway toys, cartoon characters and website games is all around us. It may just seem like loud background muzak, but it is so effective at creating pester power that many parents have had enough. In this age of increasing childhood obesity, they want the Government to introduce much tougher regulations on junk food marketing to children.

A lot of their hopes are riding on a strong line being taken by the Preventative Health Taskforce that handed its report to the Rudd Government at the start of July. But while we await the Health Minister's response, there are signs that this Government's resolve is too easily buckled by big business interests.

A recent poll shows that more than 90 per cent of the Australian public supports greater government regulation of junk food marketing that targets children. It doesn't get much higher than that. In 2005, after the Victorian Government announced bars

and clubs would become smoke-free, the public support for those regulations was 77 per cent.

The public knows full well that the existing sham of the industry controlling itself gives no protection for children. Take the recent announcement by some fast-food chains about writing their own code of marketing to children. Sounds all very honourable, but on close reading, the code is so full of holes that the fast-food marketers could easily drive a truck through it without even swerving.

It is a recipe for business as usual.

Of great concern is the Government's track record in designing policy for business.

The weak pollution targets and a carbon trading scheme that rewards the biggest polluters has been criticised as selling out our environment to commercial interests.

Pulling the plug at the last minute on the Grocery Watch scheme under pressure from the food retail duopoly is another sell-out of consumers in favour of business.

The parliamentary inquiry on

obesity was just a wet tea towel, passing any tough decisions on to the Preventative Health Taskforce. But that is also business as usual because it follows a string of government committees and industry reports singing from the same song sheet that it is all up to parents to control what goes in their children's mouths.

The UK Government has shown leadership in phasing in restrictions on junk food ads seen by children on television from April 2007.

Two years on, this has resulted in a reduction in exposure of children to junk food ads by 34 per cent, with further restrictions to come.

All the scare tactics that the media outlets would lose money have been shown to be a myth — in fact, advertising revenue increased over that time.

The experience from banning tobacco advertising had already told us that this would be the case — there are plenty of other advertisers wanting prime time.

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Back in Australia, we have Freddo Frog taking children on fabulous educational journeys on a new website. McDonald's is giving them online maths tutoring. Kellogg's continues to dress up Nutri-Grain as "iron-man food" when in reality it is one-third sugar. Sponsors such as KFC, Milo and McDonald's ensure that junk food is linked to children's sport with some free vouchers thrown in.

Cross-marketing junk food with blockbuster movies continues unabated, with *Ice Age 3* the latest example.

Children are being enticed to sign up on websites to receive special offers and play online games while actively interacting with junk food characters and brands. The list goes on. And let's not forget how vulnerable children can be to advertising — at a young age, they simply regard it as entertainment.

Society has a responsibility to protect them from commercial influences that are potentially harmful to their health.

This junk food marketing bombardment really works. These are clever companies with lots of data on promotions and sales. They would not be so

stupid as to throw away hundreds of millions of dollars a year for no increase in sales. But it makes "responsible parenting" a much harder task than in the good old days before the enormous upsurge in food marketing.

Parents should not have to spend their lives saying "no, no, no, no" to the pester power induced by these junk food Pied Pipers. We don't have the data for Australia, but in the US, where the Government requires the food com-

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panies to report on their marketing budgets, more than \$1.6 billion is spent every year on marketing unhealthy food and beverages to children. That is a gigantic pressure for the overconsumption of poor foods.

Politicians seem to be spooked by accusations of creating a nanny state. But in reality,

we are descending into a "nanny state" — where the state's stewardship role of its current and future citizens is being reduced to doing what commercial interests dictate.

Don't forget that two of the most valuable attributes of nannies are that they support parents and they care about children. The state could do with those attributes right now.

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