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Turkey Twizzler Moments and Public Policy Discourse

The Jamie Oliver effect and the politics of Turkey Twizzlers

At an early, dramatic and pivotal point in the School Dinners series Jamie Oliver demonstrated the potential influence that these sorts of series can have on public discourse – particularly when joining up matters of (dis)taste, young people’s health and well-being, and apparent indifference by schools, local authorities and national governments. Oliver dramatised the poor quality of school meals in England by demonstrating to secondary school pupils how a ‘turkey twizzler’ is produced. The turkey twizzler was a food item found on many school dinner plates in the UK up to this point. Oliver’s graphic demonstration involved pulping the skins and organs of turkeys in a blender before adding various chemical constituents and forming these into shapes before covering them in chemically enhanced breadcrumbs and deep-frying these in saturated fat. This deeply affective display was successful in producing a visceral sense of disgust and revulsion in the young people who were Oliver’s audience. Indeed, the viewing public reacted with similar shock and disgust resulting in the turkey twizzler becoming ‘the most talked about food in Britain’ (Shooter, 2005). As a consequence, the twizzler (it doesn’t seem right to call it a turkey) was removed from school lunch menus by three major school catering companies.

Yet this moment from 2005 continued to echo through discussions about school food in the following decade. Shortly after the election of the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government in 2010, Jamie Oliver got into an argument in the media with the new Health Secretary, Andrew Lansley, who, possibly a little foolishly, criticised Oliver for ‘lecturing’ people about the quality of school meals and the choices they are able to imagine making: ‘If we are constantly lecturing
people and trying to tell them what to do, we will actually find that we undermine and are counterproductive in the results that we achieve' (Campbell, 2010). Oliver claimed to have ‘never’ lectured anybody in his campaigns, and was defended by a number of high profile commentators and politicians (who might be imagined as having a number of differing interests in responding to a newly elected Tory Health Secretary). Campbell (2010) reports Alan Maryon-Davis, as president of the UK Faculty of Public Health, saying that:

Lansley’s comments were unfair, disappointing and distressing. ‘I think what Jamie Oliver did was excellent. The whole thing managed to improve school meals and pushed the government into investing money in them’, he said. ‘Of course, we could probably do a little less nagging, but you still need to nudge people.’

In the same article Ed Balls, the Labour Party’s shadow education secretary, is quoted as saying that Lansley had distorted the ‘truth about Jamie Oliver’s campaign’. For Balls, Lansley’s comments constituted ‘a smack in [the] face for Jamie Oliver, Mary Turner [President of the GMB (General, Municipal, Boilermakers and Allied Trade Union)] and all those who have worked so hard in recent years to expand the right of children to enjoy free and healthy school meals’. It appeared, suggested Balls, that Lansley wanted ‘Turkey Twizzlers back on the menu’ (Campbell, 2010). This exchange provoked a number of letters to the Guardian that are archived under the banner ‘The politics of Turkey Twizzlers’. Roger Mortlock, identified as the Chair, Food for Life Partnership, wrote that:

Anyone familiar with the eight-year battle for good school meals can tell you that serving fresh, healthy food is by itself no magic bullet. The Food for Life Partnership has taken Jamie Oliver’s school dinners campaign to more than 2,000 schools across the country. Great food is matched by food education, cooking lessons, on-site food growing and improvements to the dining area. In less than two years, meal take-up among participating schools has risen on average by 16%, with some schools reporting as much as a 25% increase.

Better access to good food at school means better health and improved life chances, especially for poorer pupils. As Lansley’s colleague, the under-secretary of state for education Tim Loughton, acknowledged in last week’s Commons debate, school meals ‘often represent the only nutritious meal in some children’s day’. Turning