

Politicizing healthy living not a good idea

By Sylvain Charlebois

If elected as our next prime minister, Conservative Leader Andrew Scheer vows to review Canada's Food Guide, which was just introduced in January. And while the idea is desirable, politicizing healthy eating can't be a good thing.

The new food guide was 12 years in the making. However, its review should be a continuous process, with the goal of creating a new version every five years or so.

But Scheer clearly intends to use controversy surrounding the guide as a political tool.

Waiting 12 years to see a new food guide made Canadians forget about the guide itself.

Even though the guide was an institution for decades and Canadian children learned from it religiously, most adults have been blissfully ignorant. Few cared or wanted to follow the guide once adulthood kicked in.

The latest release reminded us how important the guide is, for all of us, and made us aware of how irrelevant a guide can be if it's not reviewed regularly.

Canada's Food Guide remains one of the most-read public documents produced by the federal government, and many are influenced by it. According to a recent survey by Angus Reid Global, 34 per cent of Canadians have changed some of their food consumption habits due to recommendations in the new guide.

While the old guide was nutritionally prehistoric and looked tired, the new version appears to be more impactful, essentially because it's fresh but also due to the hype it's received.

So Scheer's intent to review the guide has merit. Five-year reviews are standard elsewhere. Most countries understand that science is anything but absolute and that since our knowledge of food evolves over time, changing guidelines to match is key.

Speaking to dairy farmers in Saskatoon recently, Scheer registered his concerns about the food guide and said the review process was flawed. He's certainly entitled to his opinion, but the new guide is based on sound research and science, whether we agree with it or not. Individuals involved in the process had good intentions and are quite competent.

What Scheer should have pointed out is how the process was exclusive, from a disciplinary perspective.

Most of those involved in the revision were highly-qualified nutritionists and dietitians. Missing from the process were other scientific views on food systems. To grant full moral authority for a nation's good nutrition to a handful of professions is clearly short-sighted.

Economists, historians, sociologists, and animal and plant scientists weren't actively involved in the process, even though they should have been. Food is multifaceted and deserves a much broader perspective.

But Health Canada is slowly realizing that a science-based approach is inherently wide-ranging and multi-disciplinary. The federal agency has signalled in recent months that it will broaden the disciplines from which it gathers knowledge. This is encouraging.

What Health Canada also got right is that it excluded any active industry participation in the process. Allowing industry to get involved in reviews in the past has often led to making the guide a political instrument.

The language of the new guide, however, is nutritionally focused. It uses terms like ?fibres? and ?proteins,? while former food guides were all about milk, cheese, meat, fruits and vegetables. Old guides marketed food products, whereas the new one bases its education on why nutrition is important.

Weaponizing the food guide to promote certain foods against other food sources never results in a positive outcome.

But Health Canada also needs to recognize that industry supports strong research and this should remain part of any future reviews.

Unfortunately, Scheer made a mess of the message he tried to convey. To state that chocolate milk saved his son's life points to a much larger problem for him and his party.

Scheer argued in front of hundreds of dairy farmers that his picky-eating son couldn't maintain proper nutrition and chocolate milk was the solution. We shouldn't judge Scheer's parenting skills and should respect that feeding his child chocolate milk is his prerogative. But most Canadians appreciate that chocolate milk is nothing more than a treat. Suggesting that consuming chocolate milk is a matter of survival, even if said as a joke, is unwise.

Basic whole milk, not sugar-rich chocolate milk, remains one of the best ingredients that nature has to offer for children. Given his status, Scheer's message weakens the very point he was trying to make to Canadians.

Most importantly, though, it undermines the valuable work of Canada's dairy farmers to provide a wholesome ingredient that's found in many healthy products we consume every day.

That comment will no doubt haunt Scheer more than once. Even if happened in the middle of summer, the ill-advised statement will likely endure on the political trail.

Dr. Charlebois is senior director of the agri-food analytics lab and a professor in food distribution and policy at Dalhousie University, and a senior fellow with the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies.