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Food policy in the UK: reflections on *Food 2030*, its past and future.

For *Food Ethics* 5 (2)

David Barling and Tim Lang

Food 2030 was presented early in 2010 to set “out the Government’s vision for a sustainable and secure food system for 2030 and the steps we will take to get there”.¹ The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) heralded the release of *Food 2030* as the signature statement to a portfolio of food policy papers and some institutional reforms under Prime Minister Gordon Brown’s leadership. The portfolio included a set of new metrics of sustainable food indicators matched against a set of food security indicators and an assessment of Britain’s Food Security.² Defra was assigned the lead co-ordination role for food policy across the different government departments and agencies, as well as with the territorially devolved governments, including at Cabinet sub-committee level. Within Defra, a Council of Food Policy Advisors was created in late 2008 to advise the Minister, alongside a new Food Policy Unit. Meanwhile, under devolution the Regional Governments in Scotland and Wales have been working out their own food strategies. What can we surmise from this recent flurry of government activity? What are the demands that food policy brings to Government?³ What is the nature of Britain’s Food Policy and where is it headed? Is it adequate?

On the election of Labour to power thirteen years ago, the Blair Government’s main food priority was to tackle food safety. It had witnessed the damage to the Tories from waves of microbiological and chemical contamination stories, culminating in the *e coli* outbreak in Wishart Scotland. Labour saw the solution in creating an independent Food Standards Agency, tasked to police the more obvious ills of modern food production and manufacture on behalf of the consumer. Here there were some echoes of 19th century tussles over basic food adulterations and environmental public health diseases which had similarly weakened consumer trust in food supplies. They too had ended in institutional and legal reforms, but then with powers to local authorities. The Food Standards Agency, launched in 2000, also signaled a focus on the consumer in the market place as a vehicle for achieving food policy goals. After tensions over its remit – narrowly microbiological or wider public health – its ethos was set as advising the consumer to make choices that would in turn manage and ameliorate the negative impacts of the contemporary food supply. If New Labour thought troubles over production were matters of the 1980s and 1990s, symbolized by the spectre of BSE transferring from livestock to the human population, it was quickly disabused. The new Millennium was marked by a fresh outbreak of foot and mouth disease exposing the complexities of market trading of livestock and its vulnerabilities to disease spread. With yet another hefty cost to the Treasury for sorting out the mess, the Government took its chance to conduct a wider ranging policy review of British farming and food. The Curry Commission’s terms of reference were framed firmly within increased trade liberalization. Reporting in 2002, Curry spawned a range of initiatives to ‘reconnect’

British farming and its produce to consumers, to promote the quality of British food, and to modernize the farming industry through greater collaboration and wider induction into the application of efficient supply chain management. Environmental gains were to be part of this new approach.

This State attempt to bind and modernize farming as part of a seamless, efficient supply chain had in fact begun with the earlier 1990 Food Safety Act under the Conservative Government which thrust responsibility onto the supply chain to clean up its safety act with the requirement to show “due diligence” to do so. De facto, this enshrined retailers as leaders of food standards; certification schemes supported with auditing systems were to raise the safety assurance of both British produce and the increasingly international sourcing of food. However the farming industry introduced its own producer-led assurance schemes with the major ones coming to roost under the Red Tractor logo of the Assured Food Standards.

Irrespective of the ownership of such certification schemes or the competition between them, they are now the main contributors to the private governance of our food supply. The British State has used such private governance schemes as a means of steering food supply chains in order to achieve governmental policy objectives while transferring the bulk of the regulatory costs to the private sector. The “Leave it to Tesco *et al*” philosophy contains a certain strategic logic for the State but equally there are other costs. A notable one is a lack of clear public accountability. The new form of regulatory quasi-corporatism means the main trade associations of the British Retail Consortium (BRC), the Food and Drink Federation (FDF), the National Farmers Union (NFU) persuaded by the State to manage food supply through modes of private governance. The large individual food corporations in retail and manufacturing also sit within these policy networks, as do the large food service companies. It is no surprise that the steps to achieve Defra’s *Food 2030* Vision, launched in January 2010 after a year or so of consultation and development, spell out an array of voluntary initiatives involving the food industry. The endorsement of these main trade associations was given prominence when the Vision was launched.⁴

The environmental impacts of food production and farming became a priority after the work of the Curry Commission. The subsequent Sustainable Farming and Food Strategy (SFFS) was a first stage in prioritising the development of a more environmentally sound set of farming practices around the protection and quality of the natural resources upon which agriculture depends: water, soil, air and biodiversity. Defra found its voice championing food as the interaction point of issues such as eco-systems support, animal health and welfare, and the enormous challenges of climate change.⁵ The prominence given to farming’s environmental and ecosystem roles fitted the reform agenda for the Common Agricultural Policy. In the 2000s, EU farm policy moved inexorably to de-couple payments for production and towards paying for farming’s ‘multi functional public goods’ such as: environmental stewardship, landscape production, rural development, animal welfare and food safety. Environmental stewardship came to the forefront of payments under the Single Payment Scheme in

the 2003 CAP reform in return for cross compliance with a range of food and farming regulations covering these public goods. The SFFS was essentially a production entry point to the environmental impacts at the production and farming end of the food chain where the evidence for the adverse impacts of farming practice had become increasingly clear.

Alongside these farm-oriented policy changes, a focus on public health also emerged which went wider than food safety. The evidence of food's impact on health had been clear from the 1970s. The Conservatives had been resistant, preferring firstly to defend big Food Industry but latterly it began to think aloud via reviews such as the Nutrition Taskforce's in the mid 1990s. Labour, too, was under pressure not to intervene, hence the arguments about whether the FSA should include nutrition in its work. But this agenda opened up in the 2000s as evidence about the enormity of obesity began to shock not just politicians but the public itself. Pioneering work by the National Audit Office in 2001 opened the present let alone future burden on taxpayers from healthcare costs. The Chief Medical Officer called it a 'timebomb' in his 2003 Annual Report,⁶ and the Health Committee ran its longest enquiry dissecting the way no-one took responsibility but everyone was involved. The Chief Scientist's Foresight report was the straw that broke the camel's back. Financial and medical costs were spiraling, with Foresight arguing that obesity could not be tackled by pursuing single solutions. Its complexity exposes systemic failure. At the same time, the role of school meals as symbols of young people's inappropriate eating was set alight by the 2005 Jamie Oliver TV series. Showing the normality of poor diets in young people – hardly the all-knowing, informed consumers exerting power in the market place – stung the Blair Government into responding with tougher standards, a new School Food Trust, and £0.3 bn available to improve quality. That grinding process continues.

The coincidence of food's health and environmental impact further validated the argument that what the country needed was a more integrated food policy. Gordon Brown surprised many when the first request he gave to the Cabinet Office Strategy Unit as Prime Minister in summer 2007 was a review of food policy. The *Food Matters* report, published in 2008, was endorsed by the Cabinet,⁷ and set in train the policy papers that emerged in 2010. These institutional acknowledgements were encouraged by the rocketing of global commodity prices in 2006-08. Food security became mainstream UK issue, not just a concern of development lobbies. As oil hit \$100 a barrel – remember that 20th century 'efficiencies' are mostly oil-dependent – a new agenda of fundamental questions emerged. What is land for? Why is so much food imported that could be grown here? Why isn't more food? Is it lack of skills? Or science? And why is the food labour force so lowly paid? What price cheap food?

In this agenda, civil society organizations saw the beginnings of a 'joined-up' approach which New Labour claimed to champion. The gaps became obvious. Income inequalities were downplayed. The social assumptions were consumerist. Low carbon is not a cipher for environmental complexity. But a big debate had started. The Strategy Unit's work, not least in the background evidence gathering and negotiations across

Whitehall and food chains, was an attempt to map out a more comprehensive approach to food policy.

One of *Food Matters*' strengths was its tacit proposal that supply chains ought to service complex demands for sustainable consumption. In part, this shift away from production-centredness reflected an early decision to avoid the entanglements of the concurrent CAP mid-term review. This meant, however, that the process set in train by the Strategy Unit never properly addressed the questions around how UK agriculture will grow food in an environmentally and socially sustainable manner. The discrete 'parking' of the SFFS process reinforced this comparative silence. Defra's more recently published sustainable food indicators offer a set of metrics but not yet a comprehensive strategy for how Britain will produce its food in a sustainable way, let alone persuade its citizens to eat a sustainable diet, a notion championed by the Sustainable Development Commission and now central in *Food 2030*.⁸

Later this year, the Chief Scientist's Foresight report on Food Policy is due. The fissure between sustainability and raising production to address fears about 'the perfect storm' ahead suggests difficult political choices ahead.⁹ The economic reflex, championed by parts of Defra in league with HM Treasury, is consistent. Sweep away CAP and place faith in international markets and sophisticated supply chains to deliver.¹⁰ Although the price spike of 2006-08 subsided, the vulnerabilities still remain: from climate change impacts to oil shortages and the impacts upon energy inputs with escalating costs, to the growing population and its demands both for more food and more food from animal protein in the expanding urban centres of the world.¹¹

Britain's food policy has a rich history. Some of today's questions are very old. The last attempt at a concerted and more integrated British food policy was in the Second World War, when politicians resuscitated and refined the War State mode of controls over food supply previously and reluctantly introduced in 1916, mid way in the First World War. Dismantled in 1919, the return to trade-based imports left land underused while 1930s unemployment highlighted unmet needs. That's why the post Second World War policy framework was so quickly put in place. Under the War State, there was micro management of both production and consumption (think rationing), as a visit to the exhibition currently on in London's Imperial War museum illustrates.

By the end of rationing in the mid 1950s, the dominant feature of food policy was the continuing state support for agriculture and the drive to greater domestic food production. Yet when in 1939, Le Gros Clark and Titmuss had spelt out the vulnerable state of Britain's food security, the primary external security threat was emanating from the European continent.¹² Today in the 21st century, the UK is part of the single European market and shares most of the same food and farm regulatory frameworks with 26 other member states. The European Union (EU) is the main source for both the UK's food imports and exports. The EU takes 80% of UK food exports while almost 60% of the UK's food imports come from the EU. The EU as a whole is currently over 90% self-sufficient in agricultural products (farm gate value).¹³ We remain in a global trading

environment but the suitability and stability of this environment is no longer as assured as it may have seemed not so long ago.

As a new Government ponders action and all parties nominally support the thinking, if not language or packaging of *Food 2030*, it is appropriate to ask if the policy directions are adequate and if the thinking is yet radical or appropriate for what lies ahead. A food policy informed by consumption is important; but, a consumption led food policy based on consumer choice and consumers making the correct choices threatens to run into a policy *cul de sac*. Not least, when one tries to find the model consumer. Few eat the ideal healthy diet, let alone a sustainable diet. Few companies openly subscribe to rising food prices to internalize externalized costs. Politicians are acutely aware of the need to change but fearful of the consequences. Yet how can consumers change behavior without firm leadership? If the buck passes from State to Companies and Consumers, will adequate change come soon enough? Or will 'events, dear boy, events' i.e. crises dictate belated policy response?

Back in 2003 we described the early years of the Labour Government's food policy thinking as a case of the "reluctant state".¹⁴ After thirteen years of Labour Government and vibrant food policy debate, we now judge the present status as one of a "hesitant state". Government is engaged but remains unsure of how to act – opting to clarify, to define, and to measure. Government leadership is given via the uneasy combination of exhortation and reliance on key actors in the supply chain, dressed up as co-operation and partnership. How will they all be brought back into a joined up food policy?

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⁹ Beddington, J. (2009) *Food, Energy, water and the climate: A perfect Storm of Global Events?* London: Government Office for Science.

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¹² Le Gros Clark, F. & Titmuss, R.M. (1939) *Our Food Problem: A study of National Security*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

¹³ Defra (2010) *UK Food Security Assessment: Detailed Analysis - August 2009; updated January 2010*. London: Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs.

¹⁴ Barling, D. and Lang, T. (2003) A Reluctant Food Policy? The First Five Years of Food Policy under Labour, *Political Quarterly*, 74 (1): 8 – 18.