

What's on the menu for polling day?

A pre-election briefing on food policy

6th April 2010

Introduction

Immigration, crime, the financial crisis – these are the battle lines drawn for this month's election campaign.

But the parties' policies on the future of the UK's food production will affect voters just as much as border controls, bobbies on the beat and fat cat bank bonuses.

The Food Ethics Council has analysed the speeches and policy statements of the Labour Party, the Conservatives, and the Liberal Democrats to find out what shape our food system might take after the general election on May 6th.

We found that:

- Conservative aims to free up trade and cut red tape may put a strain on their wider environmental commitments;
- While Labour lead efforts to reduce the environmental impact of our diets there is concern they could not sustain funding for agri-environmental schemes; and
- The Liberal Democrats would include agriculture, forestry and land management in the UK's mandatory scheme to save energy and cut greenhouse gas emissions.

Food is as political as ever. The parties are divided over the future for farming and environmental protection. But do any party policies go far enough in supporting a food system that is fair to people and planet?

Whoever wins the election will be given a mandate to serve up a diet that fundamentally affects the lives of 61 million Britons.

The following three-page briefing summarises how food policy could change under a Conservative or Labour government, or if there is a hung parliament.

A Conservative win

Under a conservative government there would be a focus on agricultural productivity, a campaign against 'red tape' and a commitment to get UK farmers unfettered access to international markets.

The mantra would be 'boost production, cut spending, light-touch regulation and free trade'.

Farming and the rural economy would be supported through a review and roll-back of red tape, reduction and convergence of environmental and animal welfare schemes, and the promotion of UK produce by mandatory sustainable government public procurement policies.

Sustainable production would be the watch-word, with government funded science and R&D looking to mitigate against climate change through "techno-fixes" such as cutting methane emissions in the livestock industry.

Farmers would have access to finance for climate change adaptation technology through the green investment bank, and encouraged to make money from Anaerobic Digestion (AD), Biogas and Biochar.

But the Tories say that the fiscal reality in the UK and Europe means there would not be more money for any of these things – neither through the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) nor Defra's budget. In fact we are likely to see cuts in Defra's budget, as well as a reduction in Defra's executive agencies.

Consumers would be given extra information and power through a supermarket ombudsman, and "fair" labelling scheme that denotes country of origin on products. This, the Conservatives claim, would mean higher animal welfare standards, and more support for UK farmers and their produce.

More labels would be seen on products containing GM. The Conservatives advocate a pragmatic approach to GM, calling for clear rules and regulations where it is grown in trials, and clear labels where GM food is imported – so consumers can make a choice about buying it.

Key points:

- The Conservatives' agenda is to free farmers from red tape, give them unrestricted access to new international markets and boost UK production and farmer profits under the broad theme of food security.
- Measures to tackle agriculture's contribution to climate change shy away from grappling with tricky issues such as meat and dairy consumption and land use, instead preferring to focus on technical solutions that projections suggest will not be sufficient to reach carbon reduction targets.
- Environmental protection measures take second place behind agricultural profits, with weak commitments to protecting agricultural land and no mention of low external input methods such as organic farming methods.

A Labour win

A Labour win would represent a continuation of the status quo. The recent Defra vision *Food 2030* and the Labour policy commitments on agriculture, environment and climate change build on work done in Defra over the last 13 years.

Mirroring the Conservative and Liberal Democrat policies on labelling and cutting red tape, the Labour Party is committed to a “successful, profitable and healthy farming sector that produces more food while nurturing our countryside and biodiversity.”

Labour puts sustainable practices at the heart of farming, talking about linking an increase in food production with sustainable practices. Like the Tories, it sees a competitive advantage in farmers tackling climate change. But unlike the Tory focus on energy generation, Labour predicts that high welfare and environmental standards would provide profits through higher value products.

On Europe, Labour and the Conservatives are similar in calling for reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). They all want to see the CAP promote and support farmers who practice sustainable environmental stewardship, while supporting the production of food. Labour professes a commitment to helping tackle agricultural greenhouse gas emissions, mainly through anaerobic digestion to generate renewable energy from farm waste.

Their commitment to tackling climate change, managing water and the soil are not backed in their manifesto with a commitment to science spending or R&D, but there is an (unspecified) financial commitment to agricultural science in *Food 2030*.

Labour’s belief that public health policies can change consumer attitudes is embedded in *Food 2030*. It puts forward a plan to encourage people to eat healthily and sustainably, and to give children and adults opportunities to grow their own food through community schemes and more allotments. It talks about environmental labelling to signpost consumers to “good” food, and, alone amongst the main parties, encourages individuals and businesses to reduce waste as part of their food and farming vision.

Internationally, Labour is committed to doubling its investment in agricultural research for poor countries, and the Conservatives have pledged to match their international development budget.

Key points:

- Labour has 13 years in power to build upon, and this is reflected in a pragmatic approach to agricultural policies, from cutting red tape to advocating reform of the CAP. However, there are serious questions about how Labour plans to continue financing many of the current schemes and agencies that deliver agricultural policy on the ground.
- Unlike the Tories, Labour is willing to start tackling the issues surrounding GHG emissions and consumption, encouraging consumers to embrace a healthy diet.
- Like the Conservatives, they recommend a voluntary approach to reducing agricultural GHG emissions, which the evidence suggests does not go far enough.

A hung parliament

In a hung parliament the Liberal Democrats would be key influencers in future agricultural policies. Many of their stated policies are similar to the current Government's, promising an injection of cash into low-carbon farming R&D, and promoting better practices to farmers. There is an outside chance that the Lib Dems' more radical view of the CAP may force a weak government to take a different stance in CAP reform negotiations. They advocate the replacing the CAP with a Sustainable Land Use and Rural Development Policy.

They advocate setting up an 'Agricultural Energy Saving Executive' (AESE) within the Department for the Environment Food and Rural Affairs which would coordinate the advice given to farmers and would provide direct funding support for rural energy saving initiatives.

Like the Conservatives, the Lib Dems promise to cut red tape for farmers but, unlike the Tories, they would redistribute EU subsidies from the biggest landlords to the smallest farmers.

The Lib Dems are similarly bullish about protecting the environment through opposing GM crops, and lobbying the EU to focus payments for farms that maintain the rural environment and reduce the environmental impact of agriculture. This could prove problematic for a weak Conservative or Labour government if they try to push through legislation on GM trials in the UK.

They would support Conservative efforts to introduce better country of origin labels to ensure animal welfare standards, but would go further and demand the government lobby the EU to require environmental labels to have high standards.

They would encourage farmers to look after their land and conserve energy by including agriculture, forestry and land management in the proposed Carbon Reduction Commitment Energy Efficiency Scheme. This is unlikely to be taken up by either a Labour or Conservative ruling party.

Like the current Government, the Lib Dems would encourage sustainable consumption, production and lifestyles.

Key points:

- A hung parliament would most probably see a continuation of the status quo in agricultural policy, with the Lib Dems supporting Labour or Conservative policies on climate change, food security and rural protection, but without enough power to insist on their more radical plans.
- For the Liberal Democrats, agriculture is part of a wider policy commitment to tackling climate change and protecting the environment.
- Apart from cutting red tape for farmers, the Liberal Democrats' focus is on how agriculture can protect the environment, rather than on boosting farmers' profits.

About the Food Ethics Council

The Food Ethics Council provides independent advice on the ethics of food and farming. We:

- Help guide the way through difficult issues by analysing problems, challenging accepted opinion and creating a space for dialogue; and
- Build tools to put ethics at the heart of decisions about food in business, policy and civil society.

Our Council members include bioethicists and moral philosophers, farmers and food industry executives, scientists and sociologists, academics and authors. Our work has covered topics including the personalisation of public health, the control of food research, the use of veterinary drugs and the growing challenge of water scarcity.

Find out more about our work, including the members of the Council, our Business Forum, and our must-read magazine, Food Ethics, on our website at www.foodethicscouncil.org.

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