



Just food: from political lightweight to heavyweight?

How might food ethics be placed at the heart of UK party political manifestoes?

A report of the Business Forum
meeting on 16th July 2013

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About the Business Forum

Ethical questions around climate change, obesity and new technologies are becoming core concerns for food businesses. The Business Forum is a seminar series intended to help senior executives learn about these issues. Membership is by invitation only and numbers are strictly limited.

The Business Forum meets six times a year for in-depth discussion over an early dinner at a London restaurant.

To read reports of previous meetings, visit foodethicscouncil.org/businessforum.

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Introduction

The next General Election (May 2015) is fast approaching. In the light of issues like the horsemeat scandal, now is surely an opportune time to get food ethics into the heart of the next Government's policy agenda. As political parties begin the process of drawing up their manifestoes, what hope is there that food and farming issues will get the political attention they deserve?

The July 2013 meeting of the Food Ethics Council Business Forum explored whether food issues stand a chance of getting on the party political manifestoes. It considered what has happened to UK food policy, what a good strategy for the food sector might look like and what might the future hold for food and for food policy. It also highlighted and explored the importance of considering UK food policy in the context of its role in Europe – and how that might change.

We are grateful to our speakers, Dr David Barling, Reader in Food Policy at City University, and Andrew Jarvis from ICF GHK (also Associate Fellow at Chatham House). The meeting was chaired by Michelle Harrison, Food Ethics Council member and CEO of TNS-BMRB.

The report was prepared by Dan Crossley and Sean Roberts and outlines points raised during the meeting. The report does not necessarily represent the views of the Food Ethics Council, the Business Forum, or their members.

Given the nature of the discussion, it is important to highlight that the Food Ethics Council is a registered charity and thus is apolitical.

Key points

- There are a number of different ways of considering what the next UK government might do in relation to food and farming. The first is to stick to high profile food issues (for example those related to the horsemeat scandal); the second is how food issues nest within broader issues (for example food poverty and social welfare); whilst the third is a more strategic way of looking at food and food policy. These are not necessarily mutually exclusive.
- There is a need for a more integrated approach to food policy, combining production and consumption issues. There was a clear call from participants for a more joined-up approach and for strong government leadership. There are lessons that can be learned from previous attempts to develop food strategies that may mean the 'wheel' does not need to be reinvented.
- It is important to note that many food policy decisions are now set outside of Westminster (notably in Brussels). Whether or not the UK is 'in or out' of Europe is a huge factor in terms of food policy.
- Some food issues are probably off the political agenda in the short-term, but they shouldn't be ignored. There are opportunities to frame food issues in ways that are engaging to the key political parties.
- It was felt that food was unlikely to move from political lightweight to heavyweight in the short term. However, there was cautious optimism that ethical food concerns could move up to welterweight or middleweight. There will be a game of 'wait and see' which (if any) political party throws the first punch on food issues...

Cutting the cake in different ways

There are a number of different ways of looking at what the next UK Government might do in relation to food and farming.

The first is to consider food issues that are currently high (relatively speaking) up the political agenda. This might include supply chain scrutiny (following on from the horsemeat scandal), food poverty and access, GM regulation and labelling, or British exports and geographical indication.

The second way is to look at food issues nested within broader issues. For example, how does food poverty fit within the wider context of social welfare? Is it just about changes in social welfare and access to benefits or do we have to take a more comprehensive approach to the social welfare system?

The third is a more strategic way of looking at food and food policy. The nature of food policy making is by and large incremental, albeit there have been attempts in the past at moving food policy forward in a more integrated fashion (such as Food Matters and Food 2030 under the previous Labour government).

An integrated approach

One element of a more integrated approach is to take food *consumption* seriously as well, not just food production. This includes considering public health concerns and environmental impacts of food – critically together, rather than separately. If you take the food sector as a whole, there has long been a challenge around where food policy should sit. It largely sits within Defra, but clearly other departments are also very important for food - like Education, Health and Business, Innovation and Skills, not to mention the Treasury.

It was the food price hikes of 2007-08 that pushed issues of food security – at global, national and household levels – higher up the political agenda.

A view put forward was that the current focus appears to be much more on the production end of the supply chain, and more about fitting within the multi-level constraints of the Common Agricultural Policy and about Britain's trading role.

The notion of combining production and consumption is important to maintain and further develop. That remains an area for policy focus at the United Nations and at the European Commission – albeit this is often restricted to the subject of 'resource efficiency'.

In terms of party political manifestoes, it was widely felt that it would be useful if political parties gave a sense of long-term direction including what they see as a food strategy for the UK, but with both a domestic and international dimension.

The UK should take a lead on issues like land use and what sort of food production and consumption we want in the future. One proposal put forward was for political parties to endorse the idea that land can be used for a greater variety of produce than feed for meat.

It was suggested that the Fruit and Vegetable Taskforce from a few years ago was a good blueprint as to how to start to think more strategically.

Learning from the past

The party political manifestoes from the 2010 UK General Election contained a few limited references to CAP reform, country of origin labelling and supporting community food

schemes, but very little else about food and farming.

It was suggested that given the scale and severity of some of the 'bigger conversations' the country has to have with itself (as people try to work out what kind of society they want and what can be afforded), it is perhaps unlikely that food will feature prominently on political manifestoes.

Clearly there are differences in political philosophies of the different parties. However, when it comes to food policy (and most policy areas for that matter), it largely depends on personal histories and perspectives of the parliamentarians making the decisions.

It was suggested that some in the previous administration wanted to explore whether food could be used as a way of connecting better with the electorate. This was at a time when food was high profile in the media, with lots of people listening to Jamie Oliver, but arguably not listening to politicians. The idea was to use food as a place or space to explore what is going on in society and what we think about it – for example in terms of issues, values and trade. That is what led to the citizen and consumer focus of Food Matters and Food 2030, grounded in politics and people, rather than the productivist agenda.

Guidance about food is scattered and often contradictory, so that it is very difficult, nigh impossible, to be 'on top of' current regulation. It was claimed that attempts in train to reduce red tape and condense policies and laws should be helpful, especially for small businesses.

Barriers to food policy prominence

Whatever it is we want the government (or future government) to do needs to be consistent with whatever people decide about the social contract and the role and scale of government. The budget given to departments responsible for

food is important. Defra's budget has been, and is being, scaled back, which means that there will be fewer civil servants to make policy in that area.

Another barrier is how few levers are available to the government in Westminster. Powers have in the most part been moved 'upward' to Brussels or across to Devolved Administrations. This means that the toolkit available to Defra is in reality pretty limited and hence why cooperative, voluntary agreements are becoming more common. If we are becoming increasingly reliant on voluntary agreements, then mechanisms need to be in place to show that they are actually working and having an impact. Baselines need to be established early on and monitoring and evaluation structures set up.

The part of policy distinctive to food is in many cases limited. It could be argued that what is good for the UK food sector is in many ways similar to what is good for business as a whole – in terms of predictable regulations, adequate skills base, and appropriate infrastructure for example. While it was acknowledged that there are clearly a number of unique characteristics of the food system, the question was posed as to how much special attention food policy merits or requires?

European dimension

The issue of Europe in the context of the food policy debate is likely to be a key one. Discussion about some key food issues already mostly happens in Brussels, for example food safety regulations. There is a lot of innovation and leading research around food happening at the European level (as well as at the national level).

Whether the UK is 'in or out' of Europe is a huge factor in terms of food policy. If the UK ends up 'outside of' Europe, what influence and scope will the UK have on European food-related policy going forward? The UK would still as likely be heavily influenced by Europe in terms of policy.

Current polls indicated that it is highly possible that there will be a referendum on the UK's role in Europe in three to four years' time. Eight out of the UK's top ten food export markets are currently in Europe¹. The impacts on trading relationships of any move 'out of' Europe are hard to judge, but are important to consider.

It was noted that change can be difficult to achieve in the European Commission, but when it is, it influences 28 significant markets – hence it is arguably worth the investment of effort.

There are some areas where the EU has a more direct impact on UK food issues, with agriculture being the obvious example. However, even on areas like health policy, where the EU has less of a direct role in UK policy, it can still intervene and have major implications on what happens in the UK (and elsewhere).

Two specific examples were cited. Firstly health claims legislation dictating what health claims food companies are allowed to make about the benefits of their products. Secondly, Food Information Regulation, which is due to come into force in 2014, which will mean that foodservice companies have to put information about calories *and* kilojoules information on menu boards (as of January 2014).

One response to the question of how to make food a heavyweight issue in politics was that aligning business interests with societal interests as expressed by the main NGOs is key. It was suggested that NGOs were likely to be more impactful if they partnered with food businesses to take key issues to government,

¹ From Food and Drink Federation website. Source: HMRC Trade Info:
http://www.fdf.org.uk/exports/ukexports/top_markets.aspx

Food asks of the next government?

Participants were asked what their key 'ask' of the next Government would be (whoever that may be) or what their one question would be to the potential future Prime Minister in relation to food. Responses were wide-ranging:

- Is the food industry going to say what it thinks about whether the UK should be in or out of Europe – given how crucial this is for food policy? Is this something businesses will publicly lobby government on?
- What about 'big data'? It was argued that Government needs to make relevant data accessible to all. For example, it was claimed that there are huge amounts of data within Defra, much of which is not publicly available.
- A key question to pose to politicians is 'Are you happy living in a country where food banks are on the rise?' It was argued that it is unacceptable that many people can't afford to eat in the UK (and abroad). However, delving into areas relating to welfare issues only goes to highlight the complexity of food issues.
- There was consensus about the need for strong government leadership and joined-up food policy
- The challenge was put that perhaps food should be grown for human consumption, not for feed to intensively-reared animals?
- In relation to food waste, the food system was described as a leaking bucket and the question asked of what more could be done to accelerate action on food waste?
- Another question related to what more could be done to improve food education: not just in the classroom, but also around encouraging more (young) people to be able to grow and cook food?
- If there continues to be a strong focus on voluntary agreements, it was argued that the Government (and future Government) must monitor and report on key impacts and how successful such initiatives are.

The importance of framing

In short-term political cycles, some food issues are seemingly 'too difficult' or too complex to address. It was suggested that there needs to be a dose of expectation management in terms of what food issues actually end up on party political manifestoes. However, that should not be used as an excuse for inaction on all fronts.

Whatever issues get pushed forward, they are not likely to have much chance of successfully making it onto party political manifestoes unless they are framed in the right way. Hence one suggestion for influencing the current Government was to frame this as an issue of leadership and to highlight opportunities to demonstrate social innovation leadership around food. It was argued that it may be difficult for any Government to demonstrate leadership on some of the most sensitive issues relating to food (for example around welfare and food affordability). Once again, the fact that an issue is complex, may not be an obvious 'vote winner' *and* requires long-term solutions does not mean that political parties should shy away from it – quite the contrary.

Prospects?

It was felt that food was unlikely to move from political lightweight to heavyweight in the short run. However, there was cautious optimism that ethical food concerns could move up to welterweight or middleweight. There will be a game of 'wait and see' which (if any) political party throws the first punch on food issues...

Speaker biographies



Dr Michelle Harrison

Michelle is the CEO of TNS BMRB, the leading UK social research agency for Whitehall. TNS BMRB has specialist capability in public communication research and evaluation; policy evaluation; public service improvement; and public opinion and voting intention polling. Michelle is also the Director of Team Whitehall for WPP. Team Whitehall brings together the WPP agencies that provide services to government from across creative and advertising, marketing communications, media investment and planning, and research and insight. Team Whitehall exists to ensure that WPP can offer optimum public value in its work for government clients. Michelle was previously the Director of Public Sector Consultancy at The Henley Centre. She is a Trustee of Nesta.



Dr David Barling is a Reader in Food Policy at City University London. His research is on food policy, the governance of the food supply and food chains, and on policies linking sustainable food consumption and production, and is the principal researcher for City University on a number of EU funded international collaborative research projects. He is co-author of *Food Policy: integrating, health, environment and society* (Oxford University Press 2009) and co-editor of *Ethical Traceability and Communicating Food* (Springer 2008) as well as over fifty articles, chapters and reports. He has acted as an expert advisor or as a consultant to the European Commission DG SANCO, the European Parliament, the PM's Strategy Unit, the Scottish Government, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and a number of other Governmental and non-governmental bodies. He is a trustee of *Sustain* the UK NGO alliance for better food and farming.



Andrew Jarvis is an Executive Director of ICF GHK, a consultancy working on public policy research, evaluation, impact assessment and technical support. He has 20 years' professional experience working in the UK, with the EU and in East Asia. He leads the firm's food, environment and climate change work in Europe, directing assignments for Defra, the Food Standards Agency, the European Commission and EFSA. While a senior policy advisor in the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit in the Cabinet Office he managed the food policy review commissioned by Downing Street in 2007 and was lead author of the resulting report, *Food Matters*. He has subsequently led regulatory studies on issues that include GMO cultivation, plant variety rights, organic food and animal cloning and analyses of the economic benefits of improved food safety and the financing of official controls. He also heads ICF GHK's support to Defra on the Red Tape Challenge.



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