

Opinion

Food policy proves hard to digest, by Helen Disney

Cast your mind back, if you will, to 1990 and the BSE 'mad cow' crisis. Few people will be able to forget the infamous spectacle of the then agriculture minister John Gummer feeding his four-year-old daughter Cordelia a hamburger in an attempt to convince the public of the safety of eating beef.

These days, rather than BSE we have a new scare — avian flu. But Environment Secretary David Miliband, is fortunately spared the humiliation of having to perform the same stunt with a turkey twizzler because in 2000 the government set up the Food Standards Agency to regulate and monitor safety standards in the food industry.

In fairness, the parallels between BSE and avian flu are not precise. There is no evidence that eating infected poultry leads to humans developing avian flu.

But the fact remains that a body set up explicitly to regulate and monitor the safety of food production appears to have done little to prevent the recently reported breaches of protocol taking place.

For now, the public is largely still in the dark. All we really know is that at the beginning of February an outbreak of the H5N1 strain of what is known as avian flu was identified in the UK for the first time this year at a farm in Suffolk. Despite the imposition of quarantine rules, processed meat from the farm has nevertheless since been transported to Hungary.

Yet speculation continues over how this could have been allowed to happen and how long it took to inform the public — and even the FSA itself — after the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs was told of the risk.

The FSA is now investigating whether any infected meat has reached the supermarket shelves and may need to be recalled. But should the agency not be responsible for making sure that such meat never got there at all?

The FSA's own research conducted last year found, for example, that 80% of meat on supermarket shelves failed to reveal the origin of the ingredients.

At the very least, one might argue that the agency should be empowered to address the traceability of food products rather than simply advising manufacturers to do so.

The company at the heart of the current scandal — Bernard Matthews — would no doubt argue that it has the strongest incentive of all to make sure that the products it sources are safe. After all, it is its profits, its bottom line, that will suffer if consumers turn away from eating poultry in their droves, as they appear to be doing.

According to market research conducted in the past few days, the company is now the second worst-liked brand in Britain, surpassed only by everyone's favourite global bogeyman, McDonald's.

And, indeed, much of the wider public panic is misplaced. The incidence of food safety scandals in the UK is, in reality, extremely low and the risks to the public are minimal — especially if one looks back at the issue of food safety from an historical perspective.

Before the advent of supermarkets and global food production chains, many people fell ill from eating meat or fish which had gone off, or was infected, but either the public did not hear about it, or if they did it was considered a common occurrence.

Likewise, in the developing world contaminated food and water kill almost 2 million children a year, compared with the relatively tiny number who are harmed in this way in the West, where supermarkets have revolutionised the way we consume and process our food.

Nevertheless, the problem remains that public confidence in food production has recently — forgive the pun — taken something of a battering.

A series of health scares including BSE/CJD, salmonella in eggs, and the discovery of an illegal food dye in the food chain called Sudan I, which is linked to an increased risk of cancer, has frightened consumers and contributed to a suspicion of the global food production business in general and supermarkets and regulators in particular.

And things are likely to get more complex as science leads to the development of new food products, such as milk from cloned animals or new types of foods — ‘foodceuticals’ — that companies are developing to contain additional built-in health benefits.

This uncertainty around food safety helps neither the reputation of British businesses competing in a global economy, nor the government which ultimately takes the blame when things go wrong.

With this in mind, perhaps it is time we gave the Food Standards Agency greater powers to be independent from government and to become a genuine watchdog with enough teeth to bite on the safety loopholes that still seem to exist in the creation and distribution of our food products.

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