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THE CHALLENGE OF FOOD CULTURE: HEALING THE MADNESS

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It is a great pleasure to give this lecture. I met Fritz Schumacher only once when I attended a Soil Association course on organic farming in the early 1970s. I had read his collection of essays *Small is Beautiful* and was interested to hear the great man when he gave a lecture on the course. I was completely in agreement that the direction of western economies towards ever larger and more distant structures brought economic efficiencies, as conventionally defined, but created social and environmental problems. Economic theory needed to be challenged and altered to address this failure of values and perspective.

But I had and still have doubts about whether small is necessarily best. The Small, while frequently being manageable and of human scale, can also be oppressive, parochial and time-wasting. The pursuit of The Small can also be extremely elitist, something one relishes when rich, but not until then. I think we need to face this paradox about size and scale in human culture openly, rather than retreating to a mantra.

Given the choice between digging a ditch by hand or having a JCB in to dig it for you, I know which I prefer. Not always, but when farming myself and draining or fencing, my goodness, how I appreciated larger equipment! Schumacher himself was less of a purist than some of his supporters. The sensible line I feel is still pursued by groups like Intermediate Technology Development Group (ITDG) which he inspired.

How much more urgent is the need to re-state the questions and to debate the essential Schumacher thesis. The food economy illustrates, par excellence, the scale and pace of change that so troubled him.

Since meeting Dr Schumacher, I have spent the following near quarter century, working in the world of food, an area of human activity which he knew to be of central importance. He had direct experience of farming, and as an academic and writer gave it much emphasis.

Besides the honour of doing this lecture, I wanted to take the opportunity to review what I think in general about food - the shape of our food economy, the hopes and fears with regard to food, this essential of daily life. My work ranges from production to plate, or 'from farm to fart' might be a more accurate phrase, if we include the ozone layer. Cows, as you will know, are significant contributors to ozone depletion through the methane they put out. The publication this year of the seminal *Climate Change and Human Health* produced by a team led by Professor Tony McMichael of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine for the World Health Organisation and other climate bodies underlines how serious this issue is.

Having spent many years criticising those who profess neutrality when they speak the text of food industry and trying to cry foul at the process whereby state power is used to benefit the powerful rather than all, it is beholden on me to tell you a little about my frame of reference. By training I am a psychologist, but I moved into the world of food via nearly a decade of farming and thence, for the last 16 years, into food policy, both as an academic and in the voluntary sector. I am not someone who merely wants to observe the world of food. I think food policy offers stupendous challenges - for social justice, happiness and a decent quality of work and product. I have been as happy to be a farmer, a campaigner, an academic and a strategist. All have their place in what I say here.

I accepted the invitation to give this lecture because I am in pensive mood. With fellow members of a discussion group I joined in the mid 1970s, I decided to focus on my own country, within a global context, rather than concentrate on the food policy world of, say, developing countries. (In the 1970s, it was infinitely more fashionable to focus on development issues. As one acquaintance of left leanings said to me at the time, "capitalism has solved the food problems of the advanced world, the only problems are those of the Third World").

I think Britain's food culture, long a joke among our fellow Europeans, is in some respects on an improving curve. And yet there are trends which fill me with deep foreboding.

It is this mixture of contradictory trends and countervailing forces that leads me to pronounce British food culture as slightly, if not significantly mad. The challenge is to heal that madness.

This is no slight charge I am making. Madness, by whatever label or psychiatric school of thought we categorise or analyse it, is a process and a state of profound confusion. A mixture of pain, unhappiness, vision, insight, delusion. Through the ages, people have both romanticised and demonised madness. The treatment of the mad (however labelled) tells us much about any society's rules and self-confidence. So in arguing that British food culture is mad, I am not making a cheap point. I ask you: what other conclusion can we draw?

Here is a culture where young women are bombarded by images of their bodies which encourage anorexia and a self-denying approach to food, yet which encourages them to treat themselves, to binge, to dislike themselves, to feel perpetually dissatisfied. At the same time, figures on obesity are rising rapidly. They have some way to go before emulating US figures where 35% are now defined as obese, but the national Health of the Nation targets on obesity, to get a reduction, are now hopelessly awry. Far from getting a reduction, there is an increase.

Here is a food culture where food is a major factor in the nation's top two causes of premature death, coronary heart disease and food-related cancers -breast, colon, etc - are food-related. On these, medical evidence is consensual, that excess consumption of fat and under consumption of fruit and vegetables are the key. Yet despite this, the food industry spends an annual £600 million on advertisements which are overwhelmingly extolling the joys of sweet, fatty foods. Advice on health education by the Health Education Authority, by contrast, is about £2 million a year.

Here is a culture which proclaims the virtues of the market, but whose farmers and consumers are constantly kept in the dark. Farmers didn't even know that they were feeding dead sheep remains to their cows. Yet one of the first acts of the Dairy/Cattle industry rescue plan by the hapless Mr Hogg, Minister of Agriculture, was to throw £110 million at the rendering industry which had helped cause the problem in the first place.

Here is a culture one in three of whose chickens come with food poisoning bugs, according to a recent Consumers' Association survey. Don't be surprised by this. Government's own figures found two thirds contaminated in the 1980s. Nothing about this was declared on the label, or still is. Yet consumers are asked to look after themselves to contain the explosion of food poisoning cases in the country. Production and consumption interests are completely at odds, here.

Above all, here is one of the richest countries human history has ever seen - perhaps, conceivably, will ever see - and yet around a fifth of its citizens suffer problems of food poverty. I have recently spent 2 years sitting on a government working party on food poverty. We weren't allowed to call it food poverty. It was called Food and Low Income. We weren't allowed to talk about money, would you believe it?! You might ask why did I stay on?

The reason was that for the last 15 years there has been a ceaseless battle between about whether social security payments are adequate to meet a nutritionally desirable diet. I am

one of those who has argued they are not. But nothing will convince government or the big retailers. Food, they say, is a matter of choice. But choice is fine if you have car, credit card and the capacity to try out new foods. It is a damn sight harder if your money is so tight you budget in pennies.

So not having to argue about money on the committee was a release. We could talk about the other dimension of food poverty - the way town planning and transport has penalised the poor; the way no-one, rich or poor, is taught to cook; the way, however much money there is the state pot, there has to be a more coherent strategy for tackling food poverty. The report, published this May by the Department of Health, is worth a look. In my view it was worth the compromise.

But it is an indictment of a rich country that we even have to consider the subject. Britain is not alone in the madness of its approach to food poverty. October 16 (Wednesday in 1996) was World Food Day. Next month, November 13-16, is the World Food Summit in Rome. Ostensibly to consider the plight of the poor and hungry, it will deliver almost nothing. Almost no hard targets, no common will, no new money, no strategy, only a blind faith in the capacity of the market to feed people, when human history shows us that markets fail if people lack money. People starve because they have no capacity to buy, not because they lack need. All efforts to get targets at Rome have been whittled down by the USA, with the complicity of the UK. Yet 800 million people are recognised by the United Nations to be suffering a severely inadequate diet, 200 million of them children.

This is madness - locally and internationally. And we should say so. Loud and clear.

Let me now amplify what I mean by food culture. What is food culture? By food culture, I mean the role that food has in daily life. Its meanings, its symbols, its role as medium for our social relations. The totality of those social relations as expressed in and through food.

No wonder anthropologists have had such a love affair with analysing food. It tells us such a lot about who we are and how we relate (or fail to relate) with each other. It illustrates the power in societies, the meanings any group of human beings ascribe to things and themselves. Food is in many respects a microcosm of any society. It offers us endless examples of the symbolism by which human lives are glued together.

Analysing food in society enables us to look at who and what we are. If psychotherapy can be a process for exploring ourselves, using the therapist as a mirror to see ourselves in and to help understand our actions, so analysing food in culture can be a mirror. We may like some of what we see and not other bits. My thesis is that we must understand the totality, not retreat to one bit. Repression was never a very laudable policy, personally or politically.

In our daily lives, we meet for meals. We cement our loves and domestic life over meals. We care through food. We exploit and give pleasure through food. We also hate through food. We argue over meals. We oppress each other over food. We fight with and over food. We express loyalty through food.

So when anthropologists, a profession largely shaped by the British trying to come to terms with the strange diversity of peoples and lands that they had colonised, began to investigate who their subjects were, not only were there barriers of language but of custom also. Anthropology began as a way of trying to get inside the heads and behaviour of people whom one didn't know. Today, a century on, there are few peoples left uncharted. The world has moved on. Gaps have narrowed. Societies have changed. Yet food is still a brilliant way to explore that change.

Like psychology, anthropology as a profession comes with certain baggage. Students were always warned against "going native", identifying too closely with the people they are supposed to be analysing. The roots of this claim at objectivity stem in both disciplines from their function as ideologies of control. My generation of psychologists had bitter fights about this issue and the role of psychological medicine in promoting it has been recently brilliantly portrayed in the Booker Prize winning Regeneration trilogy by Pat Barker. In this, the hero Rivers, a psychiatrist, tries to get sufferers of shell shock to return to the killing fields.

Today, thank goodness, there is a little more space to be critical. We don't have to think what the state or our employers want us to. The Thatcher years may have given more power to the state and employers, but we could still think what we liked.

Last week I learned that there were no fewer than 24 TV programmes on food on British TV. As someone who has argued that we need to take food more seriously, this ought to be a celebration, but it isn't. Food in the media is often a spectacle sport. A culture which is cooking less and less, now has a burgeoning cooking show sector. Cooking games, instant cooking, Elite cooking; speciality cooking, even can't cooking! There are magazine programmes about food, fun shows about food, serious accounts of food and, of course, news about food. What message does this collectively convey?

This is a food culture ill at ease with itself, concerned about passivity, but enjoying it, guilty at this mixture of entertainment and voyeurism. Part education and pleasure, part confirmation of our own inadequacies. A food culture which exhibits traits now manic, now depressed. Often neurotic. Sometimes deluded. Interweaving fantasy with reality. A culture of insecurity, where food has become a signifier of status.

Now hold on, you might be thinking. It is not that bad. Shelves groan with food. Expensive it may be, but at least one can now get organic food. This is true. In some respects, even compared to my childhood, food in Britain today is a far more relaxed affair, less guilty and more pleasurable. As Drew Smith, when editor of the Good Food Guide in the 1980s noted, thank goodness for ethnic minority cuisine. It has brought cheap, quality food at prices far more people could afford than the haute cuisine tradition of the bourgeois houses.

Ironically, the restaurant was invented by chefs displaced by the French Revolution who had nothing but their skills to trade. Hence the culture of pomp and luxury that still permeates eating out. Thank goodness, therefore, for the Italians, the Greeks, the Indians, the Chinese, the Thai, who have brought their foods to Britain. These are traditions which celebrate internal diversity, yet which share many common rules. In Britain, by contrast, we had a food culture driven by two key historical facts.

First, the enclosures, which threw people off the land, meaning we are the only nation on earth where the vast majority have had no contact with the land for generations. The Industrial Revolution of the 19th cemented a process begun long before.

And secondly, our class system. How one sits at table. How tables are laid. Our oppositional food culture goes beyond the domestic sphere beloved by sociologists and anthropologists. Food policy is, and always has been, highly contentious space. In Britain, agriculture collapsed after the Repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846, 150 years ago this year, and this buried any chance of a more benign food culture, with proximity between producer and consumer. Proponents of Free Trade argued that food would be cheaper if tariffs were removed. It became so, but took 30 years to do so. And it made the working class dependent. As one 19th century pamphleteer put it: Cheap food, low wages.

Today, that argument is once more rehearsed by globalisers, for instance, who want to break the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). Britain is already the cheap wage, high tech member of the European Union. Breaking the cost of CAP could drive down food costs and enable wages to be held lower too. CAP needs reform, but we need to be careful whom by and on what terms.

Food is a battleground, whatever level we analyse. I remember researching the origins of the School Meals Service. Often we are taught that, with a blinding stroke of intuition, the British State decided that feeding children at school would be A GOOD THING, as 1066 & All That would put it. In 1905, the argument goes, the Committee on Physical Deterioration, set up as a result of the appalling state of recruits to the Boer War, concluded that SOMETHING MUST BE DONE. Hence School Meals. This narrative warps history. School meals were among the very first legislated welfare benefits and were a cornerstone of the modern welfare state. But if you read the documents and the debates in Parliament, you will note that there was as much concern about using school meals to civilise the working class, and

hoping that children would go home and teach their parents how to wield a knife and fork, and as much concern about staving off the rising vote for the recently formed Labour Party - first elected in 1905 - as about nutrition and welfare or the Good Society.

Class permeates British food. In some respects, we should be clear, barriers have broken down a little since the turn of this century. But don't let us fool ourselves that class has gone. It has changed and taken new forms.

Even as restaurants have multiplied and sun-dried tomatoes and other exotica have arrived on the supermarket shelves, so new class divisions have emerged. The average British household now spends around 11% of its income on food, whereas 50 years ago it spent 40%. But the bottom tenth of Britain today still spends a third and more of its income on food. And the top tenth spend, in absolute terms, three times more a week on food, even excluding eating out. And guess which income groups eat out most? The brutal assault on the poor and the industrial working class in the 1980s created a new, US-style underclass. Some did well in the 1980s, but new fissures were born. A 1991 study by NCH, formerly National Children's Homes, found not one of over 300 families surveyed eating a diet which met nutrition guidelines. Estimates from the 1980s on found that to eat healthily cost more, 35% and upwards more.

The food economy has restructured. The arrival of giant superstores serves the affluent, the one-stop shopper. Essentially, we now go to what was the warehouse and the warehouse is on the motorway. Literally, as your food is checked through the check-out, the bar-code is read by the laser scanner which not only does the bill, but informs head office and the logistics system that a re-order is needed. Retailers are the power-brokers of the modern food economy. Our language talks of markets, buyers and sellers, supply and demand, but the reality is more complex. Whether the commodity on sale is food or clothing, the retailer, not the consumer is sovereign. In the hypermarket economy, the distributor, by mediating between producer and consumer, controls and profits from both. 5 chains account for around two thirds of all food bought in Britain. This is a new baronial class.

The BSE crisis that exploded onto European politics on March 20 with the sensational announcement by the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee (SEAC) that 10 deaths from Creutzfeld-Jacob Disease (CJD) could possibly be due to BSE jumping species to humans tapped a rich vein of cynicism in the British public. £2.4 billion will be spent baling out the producers who created this mess. Yet consistently, people have argued, from Prince Charles to the Soil Association, based up the road here in Bristol, that our intensive farming was creating problems and that there were alternatives. A report out this week, from the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), by Jules Pretty and others, blows the myth that sustainable systems of farming need have lower yields. If organic systems had a fraction of the investment poured, at taxpayers and stockholders' expense, into chemical farming, the skills base of farming would be infinitely enriched. Instead, vested interest reasserted itself in the wake of BSE. 'Business as usual' dominated the government's and the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food's actions.

As we approach the 21st century, we can better appreciate how the food economy illustrates, par excellence, the scale and pace of change that so troubled Schumacher. In the work he inspired, on 'soft' systems of agriculture, in the application of what he called "intermediate technology" and in re-thinking economics "as if people mattered", he consistently argued against those who saw agriculture as just another industry. Whereas this lecture's focus is on food, Schumacher was a man of his times in focusing not on food but on agriculture, on the land particularly. This perspective betrayed the bias of classical economics. He argued about land being seen as capital yet also saw it as the prime resource. The land, he argued, cannot be reduced to an industry without both demeaning the breadth of its activities and creating cultural dislocation.

In 'Small is Beautiful' published in 1973, in linguistic phrases which already seem quaintly dated, if not sexist, but which have a meaning which is not, he argued that agriculture has three tasks:

- to keep man in touch with living nature, of which he is and remains a highly vulnerable part;
- to humanise and ennoble man's wider habitat; and
- to bring forth the foodstuffs and other materials which are needed for a becoming life.

Schumacher was trying to argue from first principles against those who favoured reducing Europe's support for small farmers. He was particularly venomous about the first Agriculture Commissioner, Dr Sicco Mansholt, a man I knew slightly, and his plan to amalgamate holdings. We can afford to support a peasantry, argued Schumacher. We need people on the land. To ease them off the land is to fetishise a narrow economic efficiency before culture. The land is a mainstay of human culture. Schumacher, well before the modern wave of concerns about biotechnology or animal welfare, note, said: "I have no doubt that a callous attitude to the land and to the animals thereon is connected with, and symptomatic of, a great many other attitudes, such as those producing a fanaticism of rapid change and a fascination with novelties - technical, organisational, chemical biological, and so forth - which insists on their application long before their long-term consequences are even remotely understood. In the simple question of how we treat the land, next to our people the most precious resource, our entire way of life is involved...."

Here we are nearly 25 years later, approaching a new millennium, and Schumacher's hair would probably stand on end. The process which troubled him in Europe is now world-wide.

A month ago, a report from the United Nations stated that for the first time in human history, more people now live in urban settlements than in the countryside. The haemorrhage of people from country to town is extensive. Mega cities attract people from rural areas.

A watershed has passed. We should do more than just note it. We have to re-think our mental maps. How can an urban population care for the land, when it rarely - or if ever, in the British people's case - had access to it? Leaving the battle for care of the countryside to Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) is a strategy inadequate to the task.

I don't want to stray too far into George Monbiot's territory for this afternoon's lecture, but I think we need to do some serious thinking here. My own view is that Britain's class system doesn't help. Ownership of land is highly concentrated. Huge estates with barely anyone on them. The land is more intimately known through the Television, than direct experience. We already have virtual countryside in that respect. In 50 years time, I would like, were I around, to see far more people on the land - not necessarily in smallholdings, but more people per holding. My index of sanity includes a people per acre count. We have much to learn from the Norwegians who as part of their national food policy introduced in the 1970s aimed at improving public health and supporting local food production, set up a scheme for giving small farmers a few weeks paid support to enable them to go on holiday or just take it easier. So instead of young people dying to get away from endless drudgery and escape to the towns, cultural life in the rural areas thrives.

As the first industrial nation, our people have long been land- disenfranchised. The Repeal of the Corn Laws didn't just create a dependent urban eating class, a captive market for the traders. It also weakened Britain's landed gentry. By the turn of the 19th/20th century, the driving forces of the food economy were traders and food manufacturers. In the last quarter of this century, food retailers have usurped manufacturers as the key players. But internationally, it is still traders who count.

In this new food system, farmers are peripheral and retailers and traders are fantastically powerful. A company like Cargill can dominate the world grain market with no world body imposing any anti-Trust or Competition law. In British law, 25% of a market triggers a monopoly enquiry. Cargill has 60% of world trade in grains already and is diversifying into other markets fast.

This is why I still have disagreements with the Small is Beautiful approach. It may or may not be a goal, but if we concentrate on it now and play around at the ground level, we lose sight

of the mountain tops. And that is where the giant Transnational Corporations dance and dance.

Trade agreements such as the 1994 General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) illustrate TNC power, not just in the world of Food. The GATT has made already food insecure countries - the poor developing ones - more vulnerable. They had to open their borders to cheap, intensively produced and highly subsidised grain imports from the US or Europe. The vision of political economy enshrined by the GATT positively revels in the Asian Tigers attracting people from the countryside to work in the new sweat-shops and lean production factories of the Asian Pacific region.

So-called Free Trade, a misnomer for deregulated commerce in the interests of the new baronial economic class, is everywhere intellectually triumphant. Here in Britain we are asked both to compete with these low waged areas and to learn from them. We buy their goods and sell them our approach to food and lifestyle. Countries famous for speedy and delicate food are introduced to US style fast food. Countries (like China) which traditionally eat a very low fat diet are being weaned onto dairy fats and the ecological idiocy of meat-oriented farming. Already, as the huge study by Cornell and Oxford Universities with the Chinese authorities has shown, disease patterns are altering as a result. Exporting heart disease diets to poor countries is immoral when they have no infrastructure to deal with it. Something enormous in human food history is happening before our eyes, if we have time and patience to see it.

Indeed, resistance to this New World Order is already apparent. The Chiapas uprising in Mexico coincided with the first day of the North American Free Trade Agreement, 1 January 1994. An estimated one third of Mexican maize farmers are being squeezed out of the maize market by the Southwards flood of US grain. In India, mass resistance to the patents regime introduced by the GATT Trade-related Intellectual Property Rights agreement - TRIPS - showed the legacy of the Gandhian fight for Independence from Britain is still embedded in national consciousness. In Europe, at the opposite end of the wealth spectrum, the simmering discontent about imposition of welfare cuts on pensions in Britain, France, Spain, Italy and Germany suggests interesting stirrings.

Despite our politicians extolling the joys of globalisation, urging us to tighten our belts, to out-compete the Taiwanese or Japanese (while their leaders do the same to their people), debate about who wins and who loses from globalisation is underway. I urge you to read the latest issue of the Ecologist magazine which is a special feature on this complex matter.

The key issue, I think, is democracy. Is the era of the French Revolution, where heads rolled in pursuit of citizens' rights, coming to an end? Why vote, if your government merely urges you to work harder? This is a big question going way beyond today's remit. But in food terms, it is apposite. Are we citizens or are we consumers relatively passively taking what is produced?

I see the 20th century as a long haul for food democracy. The right to have a decent wage to be able to feed oneself, your children and your household. The right to have a safety net, some pension for old age to be able to feed oneself adequately and with dignity. The right to have every child given enough food to have a chance to flower. These rights have been systematically chipped away since the 1975 deal with the International Monetary Fund, massively so since Thatcherism. Majorism has continued that project, albeit more messily. And New Labour might well accelerate it in a Clintonesque social authoritarianism, reminiscent of Singapore. Who knows. Much depends on what we, the people, demand and whether we express those wants.

I see the disenfranchisement of the new poor these last 20 years as a sober warning to us all.

As the stunning work by Richard Wilkinson of Sussex University - his *Unhealthy Societies* is just out published by Routledge - has shown, when a country has an average income of more than \$5,000 per year, the key indicator for health is how unequal or equal its distribution of wealth is. And if you don't already know, since the mid 1980s, having

narrowed since the Second World War, Britain's health indicators have begun to widen again. Debating the bill of the National Health Service is important, but a side show. The issue is whether we want to have a healthy society, rather than what the cultural theorists call a fragmented society. Britain - food culture and all - is fast being steered in the fragmented direction. I think a saner direction is to try to build a more consensual culture, where we can celebrate diversity and share. Where it does matter, if I eat well and my neighbour does not.

And talking of post-modernism. Last year, my good friend Yiannis Gabriel of Bath University and I produced a book on consumers and consumerism. Post-modernists should not all be lumped together, but since this isn't an academic nit-picking audience, allow me some largesse.

One of the real dangers in contemporary food culture is this obsession with choice. Everything is justified (by advertisers, supermarkets, consumers) as the right of choice. The post-modernist analysis actively colludes with this fantasy. In our book, the Unmanageable Consumer, Yiannis Gabriel and I concluded that while choice has a real basis, and undoubtedly we chose this food or that, this car or that, the extent of choice and the meaning of choice was out of proportion to the importance accorded to it in our daily lives. Mostly, we are all remarkably narrow in what we eat and buy. We argue that the notion of choice should be reserved for the big things in life, like going organic, or choosing to become a vegetarian after years of carnivore gnawing (or vice versa of course!). Most of what modern capitalism celebrates as choice is a fairly routine issue of selection. This bread or that. This apple or that. It is important. It identifies us. But it is no big deal compared to a culture which is fissuring. Or the fact that our consumption is dragging producers in far-away places into our refrigerators.

One area where choice does matter is domestic life. I have spent the last year or so reviewing an huge data set of attitudes and behaviour on food. What we eat, how, where we shop, our fears and hopes, our views about diet and health, and so on. I have been interested in the role of cooking in modern culture. 80% of British food is pre-processed. A third of meals are pre-prepared. Cooking is more a re-assembly task than cooking as the books teach us. Cooking can be ghettoised to the week-end, for display. In the week, we are trapped by expensive convenience foods.

We have to be careful not to over-romanticise this point. In the first half of this century, observers such as Seeborn Rowntree, Eleanor Rathbone and Margery Spring Rice were concerned about a lack of facilities for cooking in the mass working class. About a lack of skills. About the burden on women. About insufficient variety of diet. Today, kitchens are stuffed full of gadgets, shops over-flow and women are not chained to the kitchen. Yet they still carry the burden of responsibility for food.

What has this got to do with the madness of modern food culture? Everything. Nothing is our genes says one sex should dominate the cooking or responsibility for food rather than the other. Yet that is what happens. Whether we look at time spent or attitudes, gender is the big divide in British domestic food culture. Women do more of it, think more of it, control more of it, worry more about it, express themselves more through it, than men. British food culture is gender- divided.

So where has this exposition of my thesis got to?

Holding my metaphorical psychotherapeutic mirror up to food culture, I think we can agree that British food culture reflects and amplifies tremendous change this century.

Food in these last 20 years has become once more a contested issue of public policy. I welcome this debate and want it to develop further. What sort of food and farming systems do we want? How can urban populations get the kind of production they seek?

The last 20 years has seen a glorious flowering of actions and campaigns on food. Environmentalists, animal welfare, health advocates, consumers, supporters of social justice, anti-poverty campaigners. For one who relishes not just food but food history, I revel in this.

There is a stirring of the spirit that bodes well for British food culture. People are not stupid. As the saying has it. You don't need a degree to read the writing on the wall.

Let me end with a shopping list, which is perhaps an appropriate food metaphor. First, I think we need to re-think our antipathy to the state. Chicago School economics and Thatcherism made the state and tax raising powers dirty words politically. They are not. The key issues are: What are they for? Whom do they serve? Who benefits? When corporations rule the world, as David Korten so memorably put it, there has to be some vehicle to express the public interest. The cash nexus is too crude a mechanism to be able to tackle the complex issues I have tried to highlight. And as Brent Spar and consumer resistance to BSE have shown, even big companies can be brought to their knees by the unmanageable consumer.

In food policy, we need new institutions, new mechanisms to debate our views. Unfortunately currently Parliament lets us down. Did you note that the joint Health and Agriculture Select Committees which took evidence and met in April on BSE did not even report their prognoses? Here was the biggest crisis in food policy since the Second World War and the parliamentary back-bench voice fell silent. It merely published the hearings and failed to offer any conclusions or prognoses. This was sad and pathetic. Our institutions let food democracy down. They need reform. We must press for it, patiently and with good arguments.

Secondly, we need to argue for tighter controls on production. In one sentence, my view is that the fight in this last quarter of the 20th century has been about not just what we eat - the battle over diet and health - but over how it is produced. The coming battle is over control. The 1970s economic model of de-regulation and 'hands off' state is a mess and should be buried. Some of the issues about production are enormously complicated, yet demand urgent action - research and development policy, for instance. We need agencies of the state to take a lead, to initiate debate about future direction, not just smooth the way for already big companies to get larger.

Thirdly, we need to re-double our efforts over access to land. I am not meaning a new Levellers movement - exciting though that may be - but building on the work of people like the Arid Lands Initiative in Salford, bringing 3,000 years of experience in the Yemen of living with high rise existence to wet Lancashire. Access to land doesn't necessarily mean back to the land. Small is Beautiful may be having a small garden and learning in childhood the skills how to get most that you want from it. Flowers may be more important than flour.

Fourthly, I yearn for an application of tighter competition laws. The hypermarket chains should be broken up. They are too powerful and have outlived their usefulness. Consumer power is rhetoric which the consumer movement - in all its diversity - does not yet have in reality. This autumn's arrival of genetically modified soya from the USA shows how fragile even the rhetoric is. Monsanto claims that it need not keep its genetically engineered soya separate from the rest because since the European Union has said it is safe, labelling is not necessary.

The entire edifice of food and consumer policy in Europe since the 1987 Single European Act crumbles at this point. To remind you, all EU member states' food composition standards were swept away by the new 'bargain' that consumers would have full labelling to enable them to choose - that word again! Now, despite supermarkets even coming off the fence and urging Monsanto not to flout consumer wishes, there will be no labelling, no separation. That is why on Wednesday a new world-wide coalition of NGOs called for a boycott of Monsanto products.

Fifthly, we need more civic support. For all the talk of training and education for the hi-tech 21st century, actually we need to give people a grounding in basic life skills. I am glad to note that, as so often, the Scots are giving a lead. The Scottish Diet Action Plan, out this summer, urges a rethink on food education in schools, combining general education with practical skills. It really is ridiculous that south of the border we cut practical cooking from the new National Curriculum. Not everyone will become a computer programmer. But everyone

has to eat and everyone should be taught to cook, garden, shop. Then they can really choose!

Sixthly, we need to develop new popular alliances to fight for a better food culture. The NGO world is too fragmented. Social groups, separate from environmental groups from, developing world groups. Great strides in forging bigger alliances and sharing positions have been made in the world of food by the National Food Alliance, the Sustainable Agriculture, Food and Environment Alliance (SAFE) and the UK Food Group. We may talk to each other more, but somehow we have to turn talking into a political programme that has appeal and bite. To do that, probably, there needs to be more frank exchange about differences. There are fundamental differences, for instance, between the ecological consumer position and the more affluent, value-for-money position. How can we help people realise that it is better to buy local produce when the foreign and distant has allure and when the damage of foreign production is out of sight and out of mind? Green beans flown in mid winter from Tanzania or the Gambia ignores starvation nearby. It is the Irish Famine all over again, in the name of consumer choice. And that doesn't feature on the label.

Seventh and finally, I think we need a new vision for British food policy.

Change has come about every half century. And we are due a change. BSE could be an opportunity. The politicians will do little unless we pressure them. A paper recently out from three colleagues and myself, Modernising UK food policy, outlines some details.

Food policy has always been a useful indicator of wider politics. In the 1830s, it was the site of battles over new technology - threshing machines - trade policy and wages. In the mid century, it saw a long haul about food quality and profiteering from adulteration that gave us our fabulous law - that food should be of the nature, substance and quality demanded - still extant. In the 1900s, it saw a battle about the role of the state and poverty, which ran through till the 1950s. In wars, suddenly, miraculously, facilities and resources flow from state coffers, when in peacetime all the rhetoric is of markets being allowed to run their course. Funny that. And in the last 20 years, once more food has been in the forefront of tension over what sort of connection between production and consumption do we want.

As a culture we are confused. We want to be nice to animals, the environment, our health, the world, in short, we have impossible demands and then we bury our heads either in guilt or despair when the demands cannot be met.

I am hopeful about the future of British food culture only if we think, debate and act on this challenge. There have been great stirrings in recent years, but we need to rise, like yeast, to make good bread.

Thank you.

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