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Centre for Agricultural Strategy

Food safety in the human food chain

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Opening Address

The Rt Hon John Gummer, MP

I very much welcome the opportunity of being here today. This is a very topical and valuable conference and it comes at an important time in the Government's plans. We have produced our White Paper, *Food Safety – Protecting the Consumer* and we shall be introducing a Food Bill.

The 'Food Chain' always seems a rather static phrase for food which by its nature, has been, or is, a living thing. When, on a visit to a large brewery, you see the yeast at work in enormous vats you realise you're not dealing with a stable, simple matter and that questions of safety are fraught with much difficulty. There seem to me to be two public enemies, two kinds of extremism, which are inimical to consumers' interests.

The first are the complacency mongers who say they don't know what all the fuss is about. 'We've known about food poisoning for years – our food has never done us any harm – food scares are all a storm in a teacup – no need for any action'. These are the people who are the food equivalent of the person we've all met in the pub who says 'My old grandfather smoked 40 cigarettes a day, drank a bottle of whisky every 3 days, and lived to be 91, so I'm following him along'. It's a very difficult argument to answer because we know how illogical it is: we could talk all day about random samples and the rest, but in the end he's convinced himself and he's not going to be moved from it. These kinds of people in the food business, whether on the farm or in the factory or retail outlet, ignore the new dangers such as the emergence of new types of *Salmonella*, the technological changes, the special problems which arise because of new methods of growth or distribution of food and the advance of our understanding and knowledge. We now know much more about a number of those things which are afflicting us. *Listeria* is a prime example of a problem which has come to the forefront of people's

concerns. It was not until two years ago that the World Food Organization stated the clear link with food. In microwave research it is the result of new testing and a different approach which has led us to have the kind of worries which we announced from the Ministry very recently. So on the one side, there are the complacency mongers, the people who find it impossible to believe that the world has changed sufficiently to demand new concern and to need a greater amount of interest in food safety. We heard an example in a speech yesterday to the Institution of Environmental Health Officers, when the problems of hazelnut yoghurt were discussed. The suggestion was that at least one of the reasons for the botulism that was found may have been an attempt to meet current food concerns about lower fat and lower salt, and one of the things I think we have to remember, and the complacency-mongers would have us forget, is that there is no simple way of getting out of the problems of food safety. It is very often true that in the search to make food safer in one direction one finds new problems to overcome. I'm not wishing to discourage people from trying to make things safer, but saying that we ought not to accept too easily, too complacently, the effects of the changes which we demand.

On the opposite side of the coin however are the anxiety-makers, the people who have a real zeal for a particular cause. For example, when we had the concern about *Salmonella* in eggs, a very high proportion of letters came from people who said 'There you are, if you keep those hens in those batteries, that's what you're going to get'. It was very difficult to explain to people that there was at least as much *Salmonella* in free-range hens as there was in battery-production and that the infection had nothing to do with their particular concern. But rather like the man in the beginning of Wuthering Heights, who racked the Bible in order to pull all the promises to himself and fling all the curses to other people, there are those who are very keen on finding every piece of information and using it for their own pre-determined agenda in support of a particular case. They will use any science or pseudo-science in order to put it forward. I have a great interest in the welfare of animals, but I do not believe that we improve the case put forward by misusing the evidence and causing further and unnecessary scares.

There is also a second kind of anxiety maker who has a particular interest in furthering an attitude to the structure of our society. There are those who are determined to make out that there are vested interests whose principal figures work like a secret army behind every decision made by a government. I don't know whether there is anyone here who knows a person working in the food industry who even remotely looks like that or a farmer who seems to be part of this secret army. I do warn however against using people's legitimate concerns in order to promote particular political views of one's own.

Then there's the anxiety-making that comes from over-simplification: the intellectual laziness that fails to see that we're talking about balanced diet

and that there's no such thing as bad food in the main foods that we eat. For example, there is the sort of comment that sugar is bad for you, when that's not the kind of comment which any nutritionist would want you to put forward.

There's the fourth kind of anxiety-making that comes from sensationalism. It's a great temptation to make news and a headline, and I don't criticise journalists for doing it, but I do slightly criticise those who ought to realise that their standing as experts is impugned if they don't take some care to make sure that the reporting of what they say is balanced and sensible. However, I remember that the Chief Medical Officer's careful advice, very carefully written, that certain limited groups of consumers should avoid pâté was translated into the front-page banner headline as 'Pâté's Off'. Immediately there was the demand to ban pâté. If I had banned everything I've been told to ban since I became Minister only three months ago, the varied diet of the British would have been very, very severely affected. These things have to be taken very much more carefully than the headlines would suggest, so the two differing kinds of danger, the complacency-mongers and the anxiety-makers are both to be eschewed.

Therefore I thought it right to say, in opening this conference, what the Government's view is. Our policy is based upon three principles. The first is that there shall be no compromise on food safety. The Government must put safe food first. There must be no question of any clash of interest. In the last analysis, what the public expects from us is that we are quite clear about what our first priority is – *no compromise on food safety*.

The second principle is that there should be no cosiness with vested interests. We do no favours to farmers or food manufacturers if we fail to guarantee the safest possible foods. The best way to see that the British people choose British food is to uphold the highest possible standards. We must side with the customer if we are to serve the industry well. I do believe that it's a falsehood to suggest that somehow or other one ought to be supporting the industry in a kind of contrary position to the consumer, when the people who suffer most if the consumer loses confidence in the safety of food are the food retailers, distributors and producers. There can be no compromise, and therefore there must be *no cosiness with vested interests*.

Thirdly, there must be *no credibility for food faddists*. We only confuse consumers if we bombard them with every possible and impossible fear and food fad. The real dangers of *Salmonella* and *Listeria*, poor diets and unhealthy eating, can easily be lost among all the claims and counterclaims. The Food Ministry must become the reference point distinguishing between false fear and real concern.

It's a curious thing, that in fact the market winnows much of this out. I have noticed the changes in the way in which food is presented today compared with five years ago and people have gradually taken on some of those things which they see to be continuing concerns. They have avoided

that which they see as being clearly dangerous or less than good, and they begin to come to a reasonable understanding of it. It is dangerous however if, every day, they find there is a new thing which is going to do them harm. They may say 'We're not going to listen to any of it - a plague on every house - we just can't keep up with it'. Therefore they will not do the things which are so important for people to do, like taking a more sensible diet in order to defend themselves against, for example, heart disease.

What we need to do in the coming Food Bill, so as to protect the British consumer, is to plug those gaps and improve those situations where new techniques and new distribution methods or a new and greater variety of foods imported from outside, demand changes in the laws. I have every intention of ensuring that the Food Bill makes the Food Ministry very effective in dealing with the new problems, whether they be irradiation on the one hand, or whether they be the novel foods which we know are on the way. We must be in a position to give consumers the confidence which they deserve and which the producer also needs.

In your Conference today on 'Food Safety in the Human Food Chain' you will be concentrating on the scientific background to the problems we face. My job is to rely upon the best evidence that I can get in order to insist upon the highest standards of food safety that are possible. That's the job I have to do. I can do it better if only I can ensure that we listen less to those who say there is everything to worry about, and more to those who present the concerns which are bound to be there. We are in a world which demands more variety, more opportunity, more simplicity in preparation, more convenience and all the time is facing the reality that scientists are producing more sophisticated analysis methods for finding those little bugs that do us so much harm. I don't believe that we shall ever come to a situation in which we can say that the last word in food safety has been spoken. But I do think that we are much more likely to reach a position in which the public's confidence in the Ministry, in industry, in retailers and in farmers is established if we can warn them against those two extremes and wean them towards the sensible basis on which this Conference depends.