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Centre for Agricultural Strategy

Food safety in the human food chain

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Opening address to general discussion

Sir Simon Gourlay

My task is to try to stimulate discussion at the end of a conference in which we have had presentations from all sides of the debate. So I will make one or two sweeping assertions to see if anyone wishes to shoot me down.

We can all agree with Janet Graham that there is an urgent need to restore consumer faith in the safety of food. As farmers we share the concern that only safe chemicals should be used on farms and that is why we recently asked the government to put more resources into improving the process for approving pesticides.

The assertion I wish to make is that much of the debate about food – whether it be about farming methods or the nature of a healthy diet – is that it is a luxury largely confined to the upper echelons of an affluent society. It is easy to be green if you can afford it: it is difficult to support green initiatives if you are poor. I would further assert that farmers have made a great – and perhaps more important – contribution to public health by enabling everybody to be well-nourished at a price they can afford.

Please do not misunderstand me; I am not complacent. There are areas of concern and farmers share them. But do not be misled by bald statistics. The fact that between 1982 and 1988 the number of formally notified cases of food poisoning has risen from 9964 to 28 189 does not mean that the real number of incidents has risen *pro rata* any more than it means that only 28 189 people suffered from food poisoning in 1988. And however many there may be, please do not try laying them all at the door of the farmer. I am glad that recently increasing attention has rightly been given to what happens beyond the farm gate. A survey of 1500 cases of food poisoning which could be accurately sourced only laid 6% at the door of raw food.

Let me give you some examples of NFU philosophy on food production.

You will not find us opposed to organic food. It meets a need in the market place and we would like to meet that need from British farms rather than from imports. We want proper labelling so that when you pay a premium for organic products you get what you pay for. Janet Graham has spoken this morning on the necessity for adequate labelling and has just implied that produce from intensive farming was more prone to bacteriological contamination than that from extensive. She went on to suggest that if a product was labelled as to whether it had been produced intensively or extensively, consumers would show a preference for the latter. I find this ironic as the work on statistical evidence following last year's egg *Salmonella* scare shows that whilst the consumer has since shown a marked preference for free range (extensive) eggs there is a slightly higher ratio of *Salmonella enteritidis* contamination in free range flocks than in battery cage flocks.

You will notice that I talk about meeting a perceived market need: I am not talking about organic produce being superior. Nor am I suggesting that nitrogen which comes from the back of a cow is any less polluting than that which comes from a bag. But organic food is more expensive than that which is conventionally grown with all the advantages our high technology industry has brought to reducing raw food prices as a proportion of take-home pay. If you are struggling to feed a family on a low wage you appreciate the benefits of cheap food and you don't want do-gooders wrecking the system that provides this food. You will also appreciate the contribution farmers have made to fighting inflation. Over the last ten years the retail price index has risen by 109%, the food index by 79% and farm gate prices by only 49%.

I will give another example. The health debate has been re-energised by the revelations that high-polyunsaturate margarine is not, after all, a health food and that some cardiac specialists advise their heart patients to eat natural butter. The common theme in most of the advice given to the public by the diet evangelists has been that the healthy diet they prescribe is a more expensive diet. But that is where the agreement seems to end; thereafter there is a wide divergence of often very conflicting views. Common sense and what little intuitive sense may be left to us would seem to dictate that we eat and drink a reasonably balanced diet and do neither to excess but even that isn't universally agreed by the experts.

I suggest to you that cheap food has made a very great contribution towards developing a society in which we live longer than ever before, greater even than the huge advances in medical science – which unfortunately the stress of modern life has done so much to undermine. Cheap food has come from high technology modern farming. The quality food we all seek in the future will also derive for most people from advances in biology, chemistry and engineering. The science which has made this nation largely self-sufficient in food should now be directed to alleviating the

residual problems. We can have safer pesticides and plants which make more efficient use of nitrogen. All this is possible with sufficient investment in research and development. I hope this conference will join the NFU in urging government not to cut back in any of those areas of research and development related to the interdependence of food safety and human health.

Like Janet Graham, we welcome the Food Bill and I look forward to its publication so that we can discuss the detail. Our approach to it will be positive. I believe that the Ministry of Agriculture with its responsibility across the food chain is the right organisation to handle these matters and I was glad that the Prime Minister earlier this year confirmed her commitment to keeping the Ministry.

The 'greens' talk of holistic approaches to problems. I think I have just been outlining a holistic view of the place that food production has in creating a healthy society. We can focus on the details of BST, BSE, Alar and all the other stories which make up our daily reading. The holistic question is: can we arrange to feed everybody a nourishing diet at a price they can afford? I make no apology for suggesting that we already are and that we can go on doing so. Let's have the discussion about food safety in that context.