

WHOSE FAULT IS IT ANYWAY?

The highest quality food in the world...", "...the most efficient farmers there are...", "British consumers have never had so much choice...", "better fed than we've ever been...", "toughest standards in Europe..." and so on and so on. The familiarity of these types of statements derives from the dogged insistence of parts of the British food and farming industry that, to coin a phrase, "we've never had it so good".

And then you remind yourself: BSE, foot and mouth disease, salmonella, campylobacter, E.coli 0157, pesticide residues, antibiotic resistance ... the list seems endless. Record numbers of farmers going out of business, and farm earnings at a record low point. Consumers with a "choice" of a rapidly shrinking number of retail outlets owned by a handful of supermarket chains. Each of them selling the same artery-clogging fatty, sugary, salty over-processed products, "tarted up" with a veritable apothecary of substances, their origins disguised in clever packaging so we think we're buying wholesome food. And all the while, protests ringing in our ears about the "red tape" that is strangling the life out of the brave, competitive food and farming business.

Is it you?

It is always tempting, in turbulent times, to seek someone to blame. And there has been plenty of finger pointing. Government is incompetent, corrupt or both and therefore incapable of either (choose your prejudice here) giving the food and farming industry the support (usually money) it needs to do the job properly, OR freeing the sector from the shackles of over-regulation so that it can prove its mettle in the cut and thrust of the free market.

The food and farming industry is, depending on your disposition, full of feather-bedded barons who have vandalised the countryside, violated animal welfare, and squeezed the lifeblood out of a rural idyll OR awash with helpless victims of the ravages of globalisation, battling grimly to preserve a rich agricultural heritage and food culture.

Consumers, in turn, are greedy, feckless idiots, prone to over-react to every food scare whipped up by the jackals of the press, with scant concern about the devastation their shopping habits wreak along the food chain. Alternatively, consumers are the last hope who, though their wise purchasing decisions, can be the bedrock for a food and agriculture system that is environmentally sustainable, socially just and economically vibrant.

Can we have our cake and eat it?

The above, though a caricature of complex arguments, does at least serve to highlight some of the contradictions in the system that we need to grapple with if we are to preserve what is good, and improve what is bad in the food and farming system. It is surely right, in a (more or less) democratic system, for government to take the lead in solving such important and intricate problems.

Unfortunately, government is pretending that there are no contradictions, and that "partnerships", "stakeholding" and a slew of far from "joined-up" inquiries, commissions and task forces will get us out of this fine mess. Many Sustain members believe this approach is dangerously wrong.



Jeanette Longfield

*Is the Co-ordinator of Sustain: The alliance for better food and farming, represents over 100 national public interest organisations. Together we advocate food and agriculture policies and practices that enhance the health and welfare of people and animals, improve the living and working environment and enrich society and culture. For more details see our website - www.sustainweb.org or contact us at
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