

## **'FOOD SECURITY': LUNAR SOCIETY DISCUSSION DINNER, 15 FEBRUARY 2017**

Food Security for a city like Birmingham was the subject of the third in our series of discussion dinners held at the Edgbaston Priory Club. Reflecting the practices of the original Lunar Society, Kate Cooper, Chair of the Birmingham Food Council, introduced the topic before dinner, initiating table discussions over dinner. This was followed by a Question and Answer session, guided by Alan Wenban-Smith, Chairman of the Lunar Society.

### **Climate change and food security**

The Lunar Society has played an active role in the discussion of climate change in the city and region over last decade and more, most notably following the 2006 Annual Lecture by Sir John Lawton FRS (Chairman of the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution), and the subsequent Discussion Dinner led by him and involving leaders of business and local government. This resulted in early engagement and sign-up, and action which is continuing to bear fruit across the West Midlands.

Kate was a prime mover on that occasion, and the Society has since run several events relating to climate change, particularly in the fields of transport and energy generation. The topic of food in this context represents an important new departure.

Kate's introductory presentation is summarised below and is also available as a [blog post on the Birmingham Food Council website](#). The subsequent discussion was conducted under Chatham House Rules, so views are not attributed to individuals, except (with his permission) for a contribution by Darryl Thomson, Head of Safety at Mitchells & Butlers, because of the significance of the source as well as the content.

### **Kate's introduction**

Public policy on food tends to be considered bottom-up, from a personal level: to improve our health, tackle obesity and reduce the environmental impact of 'food miles' by changing our diets, cooking from scratch, and 'growing our own'. This misses [some very big points](#):

- Modern cities were only able to grow to their present scale because road, rail and canals freed them from depending on their immediate rural hinterlands. Cities are now incapable of growing more than a tiny fraction of their food needs, and the availability of food from all over the world has radically changed our dietary habits and preferences ([see Carolyn Steele's Hungry City](#)).
- The need to preserve food on its journey from primary production means more processing before it gets to the shops, with major impacts on natural resources such as water ([see Tony Allan's Virtual Water](#)). Each step is a profit opportunity in a long value chain, incentivising further industrial processing, and food processing is now the UK's largest manufacturing sector. In Birmingham we spend £3.4bn pa on food and drink (including eating out), which is almost the same as health costs related to obesity and alcohol (£2.6 bn and £0.45bn respectively), both associated with eating highly processed food.
- The volume of food consumed by a city of a million people requires a modern 'just-in-time' logistics system to deliver. One effect is that even small disruptions can precipitate a crisis (eg the fuel depot blockade in 2001 and the threatened tanker drivers' strike in 2012). Global food production methods rely increasingly on unsustainable demands on the basic resources of energy, soil and water, so large scale disruptions are becoming increasingly probable.

Kate's challenge to us was to think of means of tackling these issues at the scale they demand, rather than taking refuge in comforting myths about responding at a personal level. She left the questions posed in her [blog](#) for us to consider over our dinner.

After dinner, **Darryl Thomson** reinforced Kate's tough messages from the perspective of one of Birmingham's major national food companies (M&B has national turnover of £2.1bn pa, in eating out rather than food retailing):

- M&B increasingly sourcing its own supplies (eg beef – and will do more following Brexit). Own use is steaks from 'back end' of cattle, but developing outlets for 'front end' and whole carcass.
- Pub meals are 'comfort food' and so tend to be relatively high in salt and fat. Reductions need to be gradual or consumers go elsewhere, and regulation is crucial to avoid starting a race to the bottom.

### **Discussion**

The discussion following circulated around three possible categories of response to the issues raised by Kate and Darryl: Taxation/pricing, Regulation, and Persuasion. Although purely 'personal' approaches are not

commensurate with the scale of the problem, all of these responses are aimed (directly or indirectly) at changes in behaviour.

**Taxation/pricing:**

- It was noted that although VAT-charged products had been subject to taxation since WW2 (Purchase Tax before EC entry), this did not appear to have inhibited their increasing market share. KC suggested this was because the level of taxation on relatively cheap items is not enough to influence behaviour (20% is a few pennies on a bag of crisps).
- VAT rating is a proxy measure for foods of little nutritional value (we pay VAT on crisps but not on potatoes). While taxation alone has not worked, KC suggested that labelling of VAT-rated foods might, as the 'traffic light' system of food labelling does work.
- Taxation at levels similar to cigarettes might work, but would be highly politically contentious. However, experience in other fields (eg DfT research on road pricing) suggests public opinion and behaviour on tax/price is capable of being influenced by concerns about children/grandchildren.

**Regulation:**

- Salt is a good example: in bread salt content has been reduced from 15% to 9% over 15 years without provoking a backlash.
- Sugar is a bad example: sugar levy proposed for 2018 will fall on manufacturers. The levy can be avoided by reformulation to reduce sugar, but market share will be lost to small unregulated suppliers. In addition, research suggests that our physiological response to artificial sweeteners means that the morbidities associated with poor diet remain.
- Possible ways of avoiding these responses would be to require new market entrants to have prior approval for their products before they could open, and to tax unhealthy end products at the point of sale rather than their ingredients (like the tax on 'sodas' in the USA).

**Persuasion:**

- Both taxation and regulation raise issues of public acceptance and accountability, so there is an inescapable need to persuade the public of the need for measures capable of meaningful impact.
- There are great difficulties in persuading the public to accept tough measures unless risks are obvious and fairly immediate, which is not yet the case (but like climate change, by the time it is, it might be too late for any of the easy options to work).
- Public opinion on matters like animal welfare have a powerful effect on consumer opinion, and hence on producer behaviour.
- Collection of relevant information (eg VAT-rated food) is worthwhile in its own terms and could be used to identify tipping points and gauge effectiveness of potential local actions. Its dissemination by effective and accessible means (tools, apps and other innovative means) could be crucial to generating public support.

Report by Alan Wenban-Smith

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