

THE CAROLINE WALKER LECTURE ON
LABOUR'S HEALTHY FOOD POLICY

Dr David Clark MP
Shadow Minister for Food and Agriculture

Given at the Royal Society of Arts

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I feel very honoured to be invited to give this, the Second Caroline Walker Lecture.

The causes which Caroline campaigned for with such passion and determination are now obvious to us all. Indeed, as society in general becomes more affluent, the issues have become even more relevant. To me they are of such import that they should form an integral part of our political debate.

Housing, transport, jobs and schooling are legitimately recognised as being the very stuff of politics. Yet food, upon which our very existence depends, is not. I intend to correct that tonight by placing it firmly on the political agenda in Britain. Until food occupies that role it will not receive the priority it deserves.

Geoffrey Cannon in his book 'The Good Fight' quotes Caroline as saying *"I think we're coming to a period which will be very exciting, and I'm sorry I won't be around to see it."* Once again she was being so prophetic.

This is indeed a very exciting time and especially so for a prospective Minister of Food and Agriculture. We are at a historic moment when new and radical programmes are needed and possible. Those which may have served us in the past have outlived their usefulness and are unsuitable for the 21st Century.

After all it is almost half a century since the post war reforms saw the 1947 Agriculture Act setting the framework for a successful policy which turned food shortages into surpluses. The Common Agricultural Policy may have added refinements but retained as its main objective the maximisation of food production.

Now as we approach the end of the Uruguay Round of the GATT talks, we face a crisis as demands are made for a 30%, 40% or even 70% cut in agricultural subsidies.

Now is the time for bold action. In the words of the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam:

*"Ah Love! Could thou and I with Fate conspire
To grasp this sorry Scheme of Things entire,
Would not we shatter it to bits - and then
Re-mould it nearer to the Heart's desire!"*

The GATT negotiations must be used as a catalyst for a fundamental reform of the CAP. A move which the Labour Party has been long calling. The Government's official body, the National Consumer Council, joined our crusade in 1988 with its excellent document Consumers and the Common

Agricultural Policy'. In addition, I pay tribute to the National Farmers Union, whose President Sir Simon Gourlay came to the Labour Party Conference in Blackpool two weeks ago, and appealed to Labour for firm backing in reforming the CAP. We welcomed the prodigal son, although I am not sure I concur with the headline of Big Farm Weekly which ran *"Labour of Love as NFU woos Dr Clark"*.

An amazing consensus is now emerging with apparently only HMG being out of step.

The objectives of the CAP are laid out clearly in Article 39 of the Treaty of Rome. It has two basic aims of increasing agricultural productivity, and retaining a viable rural population.

The word 'food' never once appears in the objectives of the CAP, let alone such words as 'quality', 'safety', 'nutrition' or 'health'. It is basically a quantitative agricultural policy. The 1980s saw the slow, tentative emergence of environmental considerations into the agricultural scene, although much still needs to be done. In the future, the qualitative aspects of food production need to be an integral part of the policy. It is time that the interests of the consumer and our health become more directly linked to the agricultural process.

Even within the present CAP regime, there is room for considerable improvements. As outlined in 'An Earthly Chance', our alternative white paper yesterday, Labour reiterates its proposal for the payment of a 'green premia' to farmers who are prepared to enter management agreements to

farm in an ecologically friendly manner. Farmers know that by keeping on the treadmill of ever increasing production they are threatening the long term viability of their land. We shall also be encouraging organic farming and the reduced use of pesticides and fertilisers.

This debate is taking place when public confidence in food is at an all time low.

In July 1989, three out of four people agreed with the statement "The Government has failed to protect consumers from unsafe food". Six months later, another poll revealed that publicity about food safety has affected the buying of food for 39% of the population. Last week the Mintel study confirmed this yet again.

The BSE, salmonella, listeria, botulism have if anything heightened public anxiety. An opinion poll in May this year showed that, by a 55-31 per cent margin, the public doubted whether MAFF could be trusted to tell the truth.

One area of activity which cannot be left entirely to the free market is that of food safety and the Thatcher experiment in this sphere has proved disastrous.

- If you reduce the numbers of personnel employed in food safety work (we currently have vacancies of 420 Environmental Health Officers and 350 Trading Standards Officers, and the numbers employed by the State Veterinary Service have been allowed to decline by 27% in ten years since 1979):

- If you reduce the number of people employed in research in agriculture and food and close food research institutes such as the one in Bristol.
- If you weaken or delay food hygiene regulations, as this government has done in relation to rendering of animal waste products and the temperatures of stored food;

Then you are quite likely to get an epidemic of food poisoning and that's exactly what we have. Then you are quite likely to find - as the Audit Commission did recently - that one in eight food premises present a high public health risk, and that one in 25 should be prosecuted or closed down. The Government's answer is to introduce the technological 'quick fix' tool of irradiation. How wrong can they be!

The initial priority for a Labour Government would be to restore food safety and the public's confidence.

First the Minister of Agriculture Fisheries and Food is now fatally discredited. We looked at the possibility of splitting the Ministry into separate ones of food and agriculture. We rejected this. Modern agriculture is so complicated and chemically based, and the food chain is seamless so contamination can take place at any stage. We need a 'plough to plate' policy.

The real problem of MAFF is that it is too producer dominated. Evidence of this came in a Parliamentary Answer to me when we discovered that in

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1988 the Minister of Agriculture met the NFU on as many as 37 occasions, but he met the National Consumer Council just twice. That illustrates so graphically the problem we face.

We propose a complete reshaping and restructuring of MAFF to become the Ministry of Food and Farming. Food will not only be first symbolically, but the whole ethos of the Ministry will reflect that priority of interest.

Secondly to buttress this new Ministry, we intend to establish a Food Standards Agency, independent of the Government, with its own budget, staff and research objectives with the responsibility to report to Parliament and the Ministry of Food and Farming. In this way no report can be suppressed and the FSA will be required to make an annual statement on Food in Britain. The Food Standards Agency will ensure that food is safe by monitoring to check that it is free from different contaminants. It will assess food for residues of agrochemicals including pesticides and hormones, and also for bacteria and pollutants. The Agency will also be responsible for ensuring high hygiene standards in places where food is processed, served and sold, and also to ensure that imported food is of high quality. The Agency will also issue advice and warnings to the public and retailers about adulterated food.

Thirdly, and underpinning these two major institutional reforms, Labour will introduce a Freedom of Information Act to ensure that the obsessive secrecy which surrounds the workings of MAFF will be a thing of the past.

Furthermore, the decision making process has to be changed to ensure better consumer representation as well as being able to respond to the continuing

changes associated with biotechnology, as well as food retailing, catering and processing.

But it is not enough for Labour to ensure that food is produced which is microbiologically or toxicologically safe. We need to take this a step further by having a healthy food policy. As we say in 'An Earthly Chance', *"it is Government's responsibility to set high standards and promote healthy eating."*

There is now universal consensus that diet and health are linked. The World Health Organisation has produced a range of reports and proposals on what needs to be done. Indeed there have been 80 authoritative reports over the past 30 years.

Countries as diverse as Norway, New Zealand, Australia, USA and many others have developed nutritional policies with positive, promotional campaigns. The results have been encouraging with mortality rates for coronary heart disease falling quite sharply. Since 1968, the USA and Australia have reduced deaths from Coronary Heart Disease (CHD) by 53% and 48% respectively. That this has been achieved in Australia with the dominant British cultural traditions and with so many first generation expatriates, indicates that similar results could be achieved in Britain.

Sadly, our Government have not seen fit to follow suit in spite of alarming high levels of CHD and cancer. CHD is the major killer in Britain and we have one of the worse records in the world. It accounted for one in three deaths amongst men and one in four amongst women in 1988. Labour will change

that. We are committed in our recent policy statement 'Meet the challenge, Make the Change' to cutting deaths from coronary heart disease by up to 30% among the under 75 age group.

Its not that there has been a lack of official reports relating to diet and health in Britain. The NACNE Report of 1983 and that of COMA in the following year provided the blueprint but sadly have been studiously avoided.

Earlier I referred to the monumental changes of the post war years and it is often commented that these years of rationing saw the population of Britain at its healthiest. How revealing it is to examine the nutritional structure of our own diet.

	<u>1950</u>	<u>1980</u>	<u>WHO (Europe) guideline</u>
Fat	35%	40%	35%
Protein	12%	12%	12-13%
Carbohydrate:			
starch	40%	23%	40%
sugar	13%	25%	10%

It is interesting to see how significantly our diet has changed and not for the better in nutritional terms. To meet the WHO's intermediate target we need, ironically, to return to 1950 ratios.

I recall that in those days of rationing, food was dull and boring. I am certainly not advocating a return to them.

However, what a challenge for our food industry. How to use all their retailing and scientific expertise, and the wealth of imported exotic foods to provide us with an exciting and varied diet which is also nutritionally balanced, and help the Third World at the same time.

Scientists now have a consensus on the relation between diet and health and we ought as a nation to be aware of the implications.

As a Labour politician representing a constituency in Northern Britain. I am very conscious that the North East of England and Scotland have amongst the worst records for coronary heart disease and certain types of cancer. The statistics tell us that the diet health link is class and region related.

Scientific papers are increasingly highlighting the link between certain types of cancer and diet, especially the need for green vegetables - Scotland in particular having a high incidence of these cancers. Thus I was horrified by a study of eating habits in Scotland which found that 20% of men in Glasgow did not eat any green vegetables, and 27-30% fresh fruit.

The necessity of eating green vegetables and fruit is becoming widely recognised and soon the WHO is likely to endorse this view. The NACNE Report in 1983 certainly did. Background work for the 'The Diets of British Schoolchildren' suggest that young people are less likely to eat green vegetables than adults.

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Graphically, it was put to me that not eating fresh vegetables and fruit poses as great a risk of getting cancer as smoking tobacco does - a chilling thought. The lesson is that we need to eat more fruit and vegetables.

Of course we need a national nutritional policy backed up with comprehensive and comprehensible labelling and adequate publicity. Promotion of good nutritional food ought to be stepped up.

Whether the purists like it or not, convenience foods are here to stay. That only increases the challenge. The standards of the best producers of such food are first class, and we must ensure that such standards apply everywhere. Furthermore, it is important that the public should know what they are eating, and convenience foods should have composite nutritional labelling.

However, food of nutritional value needs to be available. As a beginning, in our most recent policy document 'Looking to the Future' Labour promises to re-introduce nutritional standards in school catering.

We need a major educational and promotional role to persuade people of the virtue of eating healthily.

However, one problem which needs to be addressed is how to make nutritious food available at a price all can afford. The key is the direction of subsidies.

The National Consumer Council recently showed that the CAP cost the average household of four in Britain £16 per week. If only a proportion of that subsidy were retargetted to rewarding farmers to produce say, lean meat, we could move towards a position where fatty meat was the exception rather than the rule - thus drastically changing the composition of, for example, mince meat.

We need to take the issue further. The link between farming and food needs to be examined. By various means an agricultural policy can affect the quality and nature of food.

If we return again to the Common Agricultural Policy, we can see that subsidies for food production can play a major role. In 1989 the proportion of subsidies (the guidance and guarantee fund) spent on different products was as follows:

	%
milk products	17.3
cereals	14.6
oils and fats	10.4
beef/veal	9.2
sugar	7.3
olive oil	6.2
wine	5.2
sheep/goat meat	5.1
fruit and vegetables	4.3
tobacco	3.5
protein products	2.5
textiles	2.3
non Annex II products	2.2
pigmeat	0.8
eggs/poultry meat	0.8
rice	0.4
seeds/hops	0.3

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Fisheries products 0.1

It is ironic that healthy fish products receive 35 times less than harmful tobacco. How can one justify such a system of subsidy? On tobacco, obviously it is up to individuals whether to smoke or not, but I fail to see why growing tobacco in Europe should be subsidised.

Vegetables attract very few subsidies and only last week I met a number of farmers on the fringe of Merseyside who found it impossible to make a living from vegetables in the fertile horticultural area of West Lancashire. We have the capacity to grow vegetables well in that climate and soil, yet we do not do so. The EC has a budget of £3.6 million to promote dairy produce and a mere £0.25 for vegetables.

It is often argued that farming could not adjust to the new demands for less fat. I don't believe that this is so. Of course, farming needs to be more responsive to the demands of the consumer and a change in the subsidy system could help this.

In the short term, there are problems. The decision of an increasing number of consumers to reduce their intake of red meat has added to the beef mountains. On the other hand the industry has met the demands for more white meat in the form of poultry and pig meat. Similarly many food manufacturers have moved into low fat products. They have proved their ability to adapt to changing circumstances.

Sheep and beef production has been less responsive traditionally than the pig industry. The fat content of pigs in Europe has fallen considerably in recent years.

However, there are opportunities for positive action. For example, by using leaner strains of animals such as Charolais and Limousin we could ensure that lean, healthier meat was the norm. A growing trend is to use non castrate males which tend to be less fat. However, this is discouraged in Britain as bull-beef is not allowed into intervention. Earlier slaughter is another possibility and different feeding patterns can affect the nature of the meat.

By the judicious use of subsidies, it is possible to affect the composition of the meat produced.

In a sense the interface between agriculture and nutritious food is perhaps the least well researched, yet for those interested in providing the wherewithall for such food to be widely available it is crucial.

Clearly the recent swinging cuts in research and development in food and agriculture will have made the situation even worse. Labour will act to correct that.

Insufficient attention has been given to this problem. On obtaining office, we will establish a high powered interdisciplinary commission with the remit to suggest realistic agricultural practices to meet the necessary dietary needs. To help with this, we will ensure that we have a shift in research and

development away from being production oriented towards developing healthier, as well as ecologically sensitive, agricultural systems.

Britain has lagged behind most countries in the sphere of having a proper nutrition policy. The next Labour Government will change that. However, we shall be embarking on a long term strategy which will last over many years. In the longer run, I see much of our nutritional strategy being on a Eurowide scale, and many institutions such as the Food Standards Agency could be replicated at EC level.

We do not seek to coerce people. We live in a free society and people should be able to eat what they choose. However, we owe it to the people of Britain that they are aware of what is nutritionally good for them and that such food is freely available at an affordable price.

What the Labour Government will fulfil, is a new deal for British consumers.

Other Governments are making public health a top priority when planning food and agriculture policies. Independent food agencies are being set up with public money and are given three priceless qualities needed to gain the trust of consumers. First: authority. Second: confidence. Third: independence. And these agencies work in collaboration with scientists, with professional and consumer organisations, and yes, with industry, so that the food supply of their nation promotes health and protects against disease.

The story in the United States is also impressive. Last year the authoritative National Academy of Sciences published a massive report on 'Diet and

Health'. This report repeated all the messages that we all now know so well. For good health, everybody will do well to eat more bread and cereals (preferably wholegrain); more vegetables and fruit; more fish and lean meat; and less fat, especially hard, saturated fat; less sugary products and less salt.

Immediately, the meat, dairy, oil and vegetable and fruit industries in the USA welcomed the report. Because in the USA the tide has turned. Farmers and food manufacturers are working together with consumers, encouraged by government, to create a healthy food supply. And what has been achieved in the USA, a new Labour Government will do in Britain.

In Europe now, the one and the only country that is working to block change for the better, is our own government. Two weeks ago, the Food and Agriculture Organisation and WHO held a week long conference in Budapest. It was the first pan European conference on food and nutrition policy and had the objective to make plans for 'Health for all in the new Europe' after 1992.

Government representatives from all the countries of Europe pledged their commitment to a healthy food supply, as a vital means to national good health. They spoke with one voice. There was just just one exception.

The UK delegation opposed any plans for action to improve public health in Europe by means of good food.

I can make you a promise. A new Labour Government will join in partnership with the European nations. We will learn from the great

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progress made in the US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and across Europe to protect public health by means of good food.

I can make you another promise. In 1992 another conference is planned, by the Food and Agriculture Organisation and the World Health Organisation. This conference will make policy and set goals for the food supplies of Europe, throughout the 1990s and into the new century. Then the Labour Government will ensure that Britain is no longer the one European nation trying to block change.

Labour believes that good health is a basic right of every citizen and that the protection of public health is a fundamental duty of every government.