Food for Thought

Food safety, Brexit, and farming

Tam Dougan

NATTA- Network for Alternative Technology and Technology Assessment
Food for Thought Tam Dougan looks at some food safety issues
“The past is another country; they do things differently there” L P Hartley, The Go-Between

I started off this enquiry with what I thought was a simple mission, to try and find someone active and knowledgeable, in the agricultural community in the UK, to put forward a reasonable hypothesis as to why so many farmers supported Brexit to such a high degree. This is despite many being in receipt of reliable EU ‘CAP’ grants, and the benefits of a ‘level-playing field’ on food-standards applying across the EU. What were they hoping for under a less-regulated, free-market system?

Early on in my search for views on Brexit from farmers I came across this selection of views from North Devon farmers: www.france24.com/en/20191024-fearing-for-their-future-north-devon-farmers-divided-over-brexit

One local who voted to leave the EU said that her main reasons ‘were frustration with the bloc’s bureaucracy and her refusal to be ruled by unelected bureaucrats in Brussels’. Another who also voted leave said it was because she saw it as an opportunity to redesign the EU’s controversial CAP subsidy system ‘which allocates money to farmers per hectare of agricultural farmland...’ as ‘it has been criticised for favouring affluent landowners and environmentally destructive farming’. Alternatively, farming ‘remainers’ are quoted as saying that the ‘leavers’ have been ‘fed a pack of lies’ and that they now fear that ‘their organic grass-fed lamb risks being undercut by imports from the cheap leftovers from the rest of the world - hormone-fed beef and chlorinated chicken that isn’t held to the EU’s health and safety standards’. They worry they’ll ‘be competing with beef from Argentina and chicken from the US - countries where they don’t even bother with animal welfare.’

It is a diverse collection of viewpoints. The article describes North Devon, as ‘a largely agricultural region in a neglected part of southwest England’ which ‘voted to leave the EU with 57 percent of votes. With poor transportation and few manufacturing jobs.’ So, a fairly good ‘stand-in’ for many of the regions in England and Wales where there was a high ‘leave’ vote but there are many anomalies where fairly affluent farming-based counties, such as Wiltshire and Herefordshire voted leave, so it doesn’t explain the whole phenomenon. Scotland and N Ireland, having voted remain, were set off in very different trajectories though, in terms of possible analysis.

But the question is how much were the population misled, or in many cases just not informed of potential repercussions, by the pundits and politicians on both sides? And a far trickier one to unravel, how much did the actual voters let their own, ‘belief’ systems determine which way they would vote? And perhaps mislead themselves in the process, as one thing that is certain is that without the CAP, and EU regulation, farmers will have to, economically, fend for themselves and that in an ‘open, deregulated market’ there will be little to protect them from the effects of cheap unregulated-food, with possible health-risks flooding in, from ‘elsewhere’.

I found a quote in Aeon magazine, an on-line compendium of short pieces on various philosophical & psychological questions on the nature of the ‘human’ experience, that might shed some light on this phenomenon. It is in ‘Nostalgia Reimagined” by Filipe De Brigand, (Associate Prof. of Philosophy, Center for Cognitive Neuroscience, Duke University, US. Aeon, 20 Jul, 2020). ‘For the politics of nostalgia doesn’t capitalise on people’s memories of particular past events they might have experienced. Instead, it makes use of propaganda about the way things were, in order to provide people with the right episodic materials to conjure up imaginations of possible scenarios that most likely never happened.’ So, in terms of the farming and Brexit vote outcome, it may not just be nostalgia, but also ‘wishful-thinking’. Certainly, the current farming reality is somewhat different from the past - see Box. And the past is actually far from glorious. I have a distinct sense of déjà vu, as an ‘accidental tourist’, witnessing the effects of ‘food scares’ in the past, so I’m going to look backwards, before I tackle the current bill going through parliament, and its various ramifications for us ordinary members of the public here in the UK.
Looking back  In 1974/75 I lived in a rural cottage outside Beverley in Humberside, Yorkshire. I was living with my boyfriend, who was then a trainee advisor for the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. This was my first accidental link to a story that unfurled directly in front of me, and came to fruition, a couple of years later, in Northern Israel in 1977. Now life in a quiet village, in rural Yorkshire was rather dull in those days. I had a job in the local pub but I also had a lot of time on my hands, and not much in the way of reading material available. My boyfriend would, of course, bring some of his work home, and I took to reading some of the reports, and these were current ones, that had just recently been published, to fill in the time. One particularly memorable one was an analysis of the possible benefits of ‘recycling’ chicken manure into cow-food pellets. It was not a one off debate. The push to utilise, and monetarise, chicken-waste went on to spread all around the world. Here is a paper on what happened in Kenya in 2003:


Now somewhere down the line the thinking got wider, and at low concentrations it is a useful fertilizer for the soil. But in large-scale factory-farming conditions there is just too much of the stuff. Industrially-scaled stock is usually fed on industrially manufactured food-pellets. Grass-feeding is expensive, and takes up a lot of land, so it’s easy to see where the thinking was coming from. Let’s turn this ‘crap’ into gold, and get back all that useful protein. Going back to the Min. Ag. of Fish. report I read, in my N. Yorks village, it had a wonderfully, I thought at the time, comical and memorable ending. Its final comparison in the ‘Conclusion’ was that, and I am paraphrasing here, as I don’t have the report to refer back to, ‘there was a much higher bacteriological content in the average beef-burger from a London burger-van than there was from the same weight of reprocessed chicken-waste turned into protein-pellets for cows’.

I thought no more about it, as obviously life, and people, move on, until roughly two years later. I was living on a kibbutz in Northern Israel. The kibbutz had a dairy herd, Holstein Friesians, as they were the best milk producers. They had a paddock to exercise in, but no grass worth speaking of, so effectively led a mostly indoor-life on cow-pellet rations.

Now Gaby, the cow-man, adored his cows, and they were as well-treated as can be, in that regime. Everything seemed fine until one morning all hell broke loose in the cow shed. I was walking past and this image is etched in my brain, of Gaby with a hosepipe turned on full and aimed down the throat of a rigid, paralysed cow, that was bellowing its poor heart out in front of him. Apparently, overnight, all the cows in full-milk had succumbed to the same phenomenon, total paralysis. Gaby did not know what to do, perhaps a simplistic idea might have formed in his mind, in such desperate circumstances that, somehow, this terrible new disease could be flushed out with a sharp dose of clean fresh water.

Well the cows died, one by one, after a day or so in what must have been terrifying agony. The only ones that survived were a clutch of young ones that were not in milk yet, and so were on much lower rations. Days later I found out that this was all caused by a consignment of cow-pellets, made from recycled chicken-waste, that had not been sterilised up to a high-enough temperature. Kibbutzim in those days were largely federated and so did a lot of trade between them, so I’m guessing that the chicken-waste-producers, the chicken-waste processors and the cow-pellet receivers were all within the kibbutz fraternity. I remember asking Gaby, much later, what the damage was.

He said that he thought that around a sixth of the full-milk producing cows in N Israel had been wiped out, but I don’t know if that was all cows, or just Likud (more right-wing) kibbutz cows, or including the Mapam (left-wing) kibbutz cows as well. Still that’s an awful lot of cows, and milk, even if all I had to measure it by was the huge amount of cream cheese and cheese cake consumed on an average kibbutz…

No doubt there are far more knowledgeable accounts out there than mine. But this is part of the problem really, and rather tranchent to my overall analysis. Most of us, the ordinary public, never get to see or hear of these kind of happenings… nor do we get to read the final reports of these events, which generally get written, though perhaps even those are in decline these days with such a universal climate of deregulation unfolding. The reports get stashed away in some deep repository such as in Terry Pratchett’s ‘Library of the Unseen University,’ or so it seems to me.
Moving on  A few years after, and on my return to living in London, I became an ‘accidental tourist’ again, to another ‘cow tragedy’. This was the BSE crisis (Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy). I was writing occasional articles for small magazines, such as ‘New Ground’. I have a memory of writing an article on BSE for them, but I can’t find it anywhere. It seems funny to think now, that not only are ‘official’ reports disappearing into the ‘maw’ of the ‘Unseen University’, but that also journalistic ‘opposition’ papers are similarly being chewed up like ‘green grist to the ‘mill’ of forgotten endeavours’. One of the places I occasionally hung out in 1986 or so, was ‘The London Food Commission’, set up under the auspices of the soon to be abolished GLC, in Old St, in East London, which Tim Lang, now Professor of Food Policy at City University, London, used to run. I had an ear to the ground, so to speak, as to what new ‘things’ were going on, down-the-line. But again, this was because of the contacts I had, rather than because of my particular background.

So, I was aware from very early on, of the first diagnosed cases of BSE in the UK in late 1986. I followed the story avidly. There were competing theories as to what was going on, including one theory, by organic farmer Mark Purdy, that it was caused by the organophosphates used, in a compulsory chemical treatment for warble fly in cattle, during the 1980’s and early 90’s, and that it was this chemical’s effects on the developing foetal bovine brain, that was causing the distortion of the prions that then led onto the development of full-blown BSE in cattle. The official version is still that it was the reduction in temperature in the sterilisation process, of the rendered meat carcases, as an energy (and cost) saving measure, that caused the rogue prions to develop from the insufficiently ‘sterilised’ carcases of sheep which had carried the then well-known and similar disease of ‘Scrapie’ into the cow fraternity.

What are the lessons?

As a passing observer my points are much more general, but there is a certain continuity, between the two examples that I have given and the current debate on the Agriculture Bill passing through parliament. The commonality is that chlorinated chicken and the use of hormones, BST (Bovine somatotropin) in both beef and dairy cows, (which is currently banned in the EU but allowed in the US) is now, after Brexit, on the political table. The commonality is that chlorinated chicken and the use of hormones is now, after Brexit, on the political table.

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I have looked up a few research papers on BST, though only a small sample. However, I was struck by the fact that, even within just a small proportion of samples, just how short a time-scale the average research was concluded over, but all my samples were US based research. These were averaging around a norm of two weeks-worth of samples taken. Still scientific research is expensive. There is the further problem of how and when samples are taken. There are three natural hormones commonly used (testosterone, estradiol, and progesterone) and three are chromically similar synthetic hormones (melengestrol acetate, trenbolone acetate and zeranol). Now I must add it is IMPOSSIBLE to have hormone-free milk or beef. These lovely animals need some hormones, in order to grow and mate, so we are really just talking amounts, and kinds of hormones. But from my impression of current scientific research, if my modest sample was anything to go by, it is impossible to police BST use in any meaningful way, if the ambition is to produce meat as cheaply as possible. Once both are present, there is no way to determine the actual amounts of the natural and artificial hormones over the whole life-cycle.

Is it possible to verify if a cow is brought up on the synthetic hormones, and switched to the natural ones before slaughter? I don’t know, but, certainly if the average scientific tests conducted on them last only 2 weeks or so it is unlikely that it would ever be established or not. The de-regulated market then is one that will supposedly run on ‘trust’. Alas the history of food ‘scams’ (horse-meat being sold as cow-meat in processed food) as well as livestock catastrophes, such as SARS, and BSE, indicate that human nature is such as to enable many people to get away with whatever is possible, for economic gain, and that de-regulation will only lead to more deception, and less accountability.

Composition VIII, (The Cow) Theo van Doesburg, MOMA, 1918, New York. The final abstraction...
Does that matter? I have read accounts of at least one of the synthetic hormones being a possible cancer risk. But we don’t know, and there is a lot of ‘fake news’ out there. You would need someone far more qualified to comment on this problem than I am. So where do we go to, for reliable information, on the long-term effects of hormone supplementation, and its possible downsides? There are a few ex-Olympic coaches who might have some answers perhaps!... Nevertheless, there is evidence that cows, on long-term growth-hormones do get more mastitis, and hence need more anti-biotic treatment, which of course leads to more anti-biotic resistance. This whole thing, when put under even just minor scrutiny, seems to be evolving into something that is the very opposite of creating a ‘cheap’ food source.

So, the question now seems to be just who really is paying the whole price of seemingly cheap food, and importantly, what form does that ‘price’ take? Now the animals are paying part of it. They are sicker, living in cramped conditions, and they have no natural development, at their own pace. It is cheaper to bulk them up with hormones, than with good food. The larger landscape is also paying the price somewhat, by industrial farming, causing huge damage to waterways through the toxic-runoff from the industrial-farming complexes. George Monbiot in the Guardian gives a good account of the various ways that our landscapes and rivers are diminished by current (and this is whilst we are still within the EU regulatory framework) agricultural policies. He gives the rather amazing statistic that, at least in the south west, there are only enough ‘statutory’ regulators to inspect farm slurry-stores once, in every 200 years! Who knows what it will be like under our ‘take back control’ less-regulated future. (http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/aug/12/government-south-west-uk-waterways-farming-water-companies)

Conclusions
What I am hoping for, in writing this, is to encourage other people, to ask more questions, of agriculturists, politicians, scientists and, most importantly, taking a good long look at ‘following the money’... There are so many other things that I could add. Such as the question of what degree of excessive hormones in meat consumption, might lead to possible disruption of sexual normative development/identity in young children? I rather feared drowning myself in unasked questions. Others are much better placed to at least grapple with the scientific ramifications of what the after-effects of our technological choices might be. My dispute is with the main priority, as being based on cost and subsequent profit. But there is also the question of who is actually free to speak out, on behalf of the health of the industry, or indeed the poor cows and chickens, and dare I mention pigs as well, when so many of the people who design the regulations of the industry are beholden, for their whole livelihoods, to fulfilling their political master’s political policy ambitions. We have, after all, an historical culture of treating our whistle-blowers appallingly. Many of our past experiments within agriculture, for merely monetising the system for maximum gain, have not turned out too well at all, and have led to hugely expensive costs, further down the line, in order to ameliorate the consequences. So, who picks up the bill for the mistakes? It does not appear to be the industry itself, but the humble tax payer. The price of cheap meat to the poor somehow doesn’t look so cheap after all.

So, what did the pro-Brexit farmers expect, if Filipe De Brigand, quoted above, is right? Were they merely nostalgically hankering after a lost, but purely ‘imagined’ world of ‘taking back control’ in the belief perhaps that they can and would do the right thing if regulations are removed. My own ‘lost and imagined world’ is full of happy healthy animals that are fed only on the food that they would choose for themselves. This should be some sort of sacred principle to me, that all humans should obey. So, herbivores would then stay their own voguishly ‘vegetarian’ selves. Yes, it means a lot less meat to be eaten by humans everywhere. But this surely is a price worth paying. That is us all becoming a lot more vegetarian, with the upside that a lot of us, and our environment, would become healthier too.

But having said all that, I am still waiting for a knowledgeable ‘leaver’ farmer to come along, and tell me exactly what is was that they were hoping for, after Brexit.

Diversification? Farmers are increasingly under economic pressure to move into non-food farming activities (i.e. outside the official 0.6 % contribution to GNP) offering leisure facilities e.g. glamping and green-tourism. After Brexit, UK farmers may have little choice but to do this. But these activities have eco-costs as they encourage much more travel into areas with hardly any public transport. Re-wilding may be better for the ecosystem but may well lead to far more tourism and more impacts. Energy farming might be better?

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