

The BSE crisis - British officials fall out over the "Beef is Safe" campaign

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'British beef is safe' was the constant message of the previous Conservative government, its top officials and the meat and farming industries as the crisis resulting from Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE), or 'Mad Cow Disease', unfolded.

This apparent unity has started to collapse as each of the protagonists has tried to justify their own actions and pass the blame to others for a public scandal that has seen 29 people die from the human form of BSE, and has cost billions of pounds in compensation paid to the beef industry.

The unsavoury spectacle of senior public health officials and industry spokesman exchanging claim and counter-claim in an attempt to pass the buck could be witnessed during the Labour government's public inquiry into the BSE crisis. The official terms of reference of the 'BSE Inquiry', set up earlier this year, are: 'To establish and review the history of the emergence and identification of BSE and new variant CJD in the United Kingdom, and of the action taken in response to it up to the 20 March 1996; to reach conclusions on the adequacy of that response, taking account of the state of knowledge at the time; and to report on these matters.' The 1996 date corresponds to the announcement in parliament by the then Tory Secretary of State for Health Stephen Dorrell that a link between BSE in cattle and new variant Creutzfeld-Jakob Disease (nvCJD) in humans had been confirmed.

Three officials, in particular, dominated the nation's TV screens and newspapers during this period. Sir Donald Acheson was the Chief Medical Officer at the Department of Health from 1983 to 1991. His successor was Sir Kenneth Calman. Keith Meldrum was Chief Veterinary Officer between 1988 and 1997 at the Ministry of Agriculture (MAFF).

All made repeated statements that 'beef is safe'. Since

the cattle organs considered most dangerous, such as the brain, spinal cord and other offal, were banned for human consumption in 1989, it was said that eating beef muscle did not cause CJD.

Sir Donald Acheson told the inquiry there was 'tension' between his department and MAFF and that he was pressurised to say beef was safe. 'It was several years after the events that I became aware that for some people the word 'safe', without qualification, means zero risk,' he said. Asked about his reassuring statement to the media after a Siamese cat died of BSE in 1990, he said, 'I find it impossible to reconstruct the considerations that led to the wording of my own contribution, in particular, why I chose to follow MAFF in the word 'safely' rather than 'with confidence'.'

His successor Sir Kenneth Calman was aware there was a chance BSE might infect humans even before he became Chief Medical Officer. After the Siamese cat died, he said it 'strengthened my view', but he still endorsed Acheson's statement that beef was safe. He explained that safe meant 'negligible' and not 'zero' risk.

Calman claimed he was first formally told there were serious breaches in the offal ban by Keith Meldrum in October 1995. He claims Meldrum expressed disappointment at the breaches, but 'understated the importance of this information.' Calman also said he was astonished at the 'careless attitude' of farmers and slaughterhouse owners. 'For me it was important the public were given all the information. This included the important new information that offal could have entered the human food chain. MAFF clearly found that a step too far for them and wanted to change that.' He said MAFF were more worried about the costs to farmers and reassuring the public. However, Calman himself agreed to advertisements by the Meat and

Livestock Commission two months later reassuring the public regarding the safety of eating beef.

The former Chief Veterinary Officer replied to Calman's accusations, saying, 'I should be judged by my actions and not by my words.' Meldrum said, 'It is unfortunate that those who are following the inquiry are not able to see the totality of the picture and therefore the comments from Sir Kenneth Calman are not being seen against the comments from my old department [MAFF].' He said he had kept Acheson and Calman informed of any new findings, however unimportant. When he talked to the media he said he was simply following the line taken by successive Chief Medical Officers, particularly on the safety of beef.

However, his statement to the BSE Inquiry shows he was aware of problems with the offal ban from the start. In August 1992 he received reports from contacts in the meat industry about failures to separate out the banned offal. In May 1994 the rendering company Prosper de Mulder repeated the same information.

Meldrum also reported that Ministers and officials had discussed destroying all British cattle in 1990 but admitted that no contingency plans had been drawn up for the eventuality the disease might spread to humans. 'It would have been the equivalent of planning for a disaster,' he added.

Andrew Fleetwood, a MAFF vet, said he was told unscrupulous abattoirs had cheated the offal ban and it was treated 'little better than a joke in certain quarters' of the meat industry. Meat Inspectors 'were often quite junior and easily browbeaten by the slaughterhouse managers,' who were probably aware of any inspections in advance, he claimed.

Peter Carrigan, whose company disposes of abattoir waste, complained of Meldrum and 'the clowns whose total inaptitude brought this once prosperous industry to its knees.' He said he was 'more likely to meet a Martian than a MAFF vet within an abattoir.'

After seven months of hearings, the BSE Inquiry finally took evidence from a number of relatives who had lost their loved ones to nvCJD. Although the beef industry was paid billions of pounds in state handouts for its losses, the relatives of those struck down by this terrible disease have yet to receive a single penny in compensation. Indeed, it has been left to the families to draw up proposals for the provision and costing of care for nvCJD patients. Many suffered appalling problems

trying to care for and bury their relatives.

Dot Churchill explained that a wheelchair only arrived for her son Stephen three days after he had died in 1995. She said she was in contact with a family who had made 42 calls to different medical professionals about their son, who was showing the symptoms of nvCJD. Nobody would listen until he was arrested by the police. She said, 'I think that is a very sad reflection that three and a half years on this is still happening.' The people who told us beef was safe in the past are still giving the same reassurances today, she added.

More information is yet to come out. Meldrum has so far refused to release tapes in which he voices his opinions of other officials and ministers. MAFF, the government department implicated in the whole crisis, would not provide the BSE Inquiry with a report in its possession, believed to contain a history of the BSE crisis, listing MAFF's mistakes and potential legal liabilities.

The first phase of the BSE Inquiry concludes this year with evidence from former government Ministers. Phase two will take further evidence clarifying submissions, dealing with conflicts and potential criticisms. It will conclude with final submissions from the counsel to the inquiry. The inquiry report, expected in July 1999, will first be presented to government ministers.

The official web site of the Public Inquiry set up to establish and review the history into the emergence and identification of BSE and new variant CJD in the United Kingdom can be accessed at: <http://www.bse.org.uk/>

See Also:

Human BSE/CJD: Anatomy of a Health Disaster

New book on BSE widely praised

[27 March 1998]

WSWS coverage of the BSE crisis



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