

# Britain demands swift action against France over beef ban

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The British Labour government has demanded that the European Union take "fast track" legal action against France, following the Jospin government's decision to maintain its ban on British beef. The clash has revived fears of a trade war between the two countries, just as European leaders gather for an EU summit in Helsinki this weekend.

The dispute began in October following the EU's decision to lift its ban on British beef, imposed in 1996 after a link was established between a new variant of the deadly Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease that has killed over 40 people and eating meat infected with BSE or "Mad Cow Disease". France, however, continued to refuse to allow British beef to be sold in its shops, arguing that a report by its newly established Food Safety Agency (FFSA) had established that British beef was still not free from BSE. On October 8, Germany also said that it would not lift its own ban until the FFSA's report had been studied further.

Chauvinistic outpourings followed in the British press and sections of the political establishment—including Labour's Agriculture Minister Nick Brown's pledge of a personal boycott of all French goods. The "beef war" united agricultural concerns in Britain with the Conservative Party and sections of the media in a virulent anti-European campaign. Whilst rejecting calls for a tit-for-tat trade war with France, Prime Minister Blair pandered to the anti-European court, openly snubbing French Prime Minister Jospin at the EU summit on October 15.

Blair had argued that "right" would inevitably win through, and France would be forced to give way, so long as Britain pursued the issue through official channels. His position appeared to have been vindicated, when on October 29 EU scientists unanimously agreed that the FFSA study provided no

grounds for them to revise their earlier decision to lift the ban.

As the EU threatened legal action against France, the Jospin government agreed to refer the matter back to the FFSA and began seeking a compromise solution with Britain—including the clearer labelling of British beef. The Blair government became increasingly confident that France would give way; so much so that when the FFSA issued a "non-committal opinion" on the safety of British beef on Monday, the decision was interpreted in Britain as a ploy to take some of the heat from concerned French consumers off the Jospin government.

The FFSA said that having the "protocol of understanding" between London and Paris on the health and safety measures now in place to safeguard against BSE, they were unable to reach a clear decision. Their report indicated that lifting the beef ban was a political decision for the French government, whilst reiterating that there could be no scientific certainty about the removal of BSE and that the new controls could not guarantee a "direct and immediate impact" on the level of risk.

The British media opined that France, having thus saved the face of its FFSA, would lift the ban and allow consumers to decide. With Jospin facing a Thursday deadline to make the government's position known, or face EU action, his agreement was regarded as a foregone conclusion. That he decided instead to maintain the ban is regarded as a humiliation for Blair and the government's "softly-softly" approach towards Europe.

After two hours of talks between Jospin and nine ministers, the French government issued a brief statement announcing its decision. Given the FFSA's view that there continued to be, even if not quantifiable,

health risks from British beef, the statement said, "France is not in a position at this time to lift the embargo." In an implied response to British charges that the ban was in order to protect French trade interests, the statement added that "the French government is above all driven by the priority of public health and consumer safety". Amongst outstanding problems, it continued, were insufficient guarantees on testing as well as Britain having to adopt EU rules on labelling and tracing the origin of British beef and related products.

The French government subsequently made it clear that it was ready to work with the EU and Britain to find a solution to the crisis on the ban. European Affairs Minister Pierre Moscovici and Agriculture Minister Jean Glavany said in radio interviews that the decision was "not a war against Britain or Europe.... You don't play around with health." Moscovici went on, "We understand their [Britain's] problems, we ask them to understand ours." The government would like to have lifted the ban, but could not take any the chance after the FFSA reiterated its concerns over public health. Glaveney said, "I'll stress it again, we want to say to the British government that it's not an unfriendly decision, that we just want to protect French and therefore European consumers."

Blair let it be known that he had immediately made an "angry" telephone call to Jospin, protesting his "totally wrong" verdict. As the Conservative Party thundered against the French being allowed to "run rings" around Britain, a spokesman for Blair said that "The prime minister has spoken tonight to Lionel Jospin to protest at the French decision. He said it was totally wrong given that the UK had European law and science on our side." The government "has already been in touch with the [European] Commission to ensure the relevant legal steps were being taken forward."

Nick Brown said that Britain would "now fight our corner through the courts ... we don't seem to be able to resolve it by discussion—and By God we have tried." Britain's National Farmers Union President Ben Gill questioned whether France should be allowed to remain an EU member and suggested that people retaliate by "looking hard" at whether they continue to buy French goods. By Thursday morning, the British government had called on the EU to begin "fast track" legal

proceedings against France, which could otherwise take months, if not years, to come to court. "It is a clear cut case. We want to get on with it," Brown said, urging an "expedited procedure."

In response the EU said it would continue to the next stage of legal action against France "as soon as possible". But as Jospin pointed out, more than 40 countries worldwide maintain an embargo on British beef, including Australia, New Zealand and the United States. In Europe, Germany also maintains its own ban.



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