

Britain's official inquiry into BSE/Mad Cow Disease finds no one to blame

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Over 80 people in Britain have already died from variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (vCJD), the fatal brain-wasting illness that comes from BSE (Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy) or Mad Cow Disease in cattle, and the eventual toll could run into thousands.

BSE and vCJD represent a continuing danger to people in Britain and throughout the world. There have already been deaths from vCJD reported in France and Italy, while just days following its publication, two more deaths occurred in Britain. 14-year-old Zoe Jeffries died on Saturday October 29 after being diagnosed with vCJD when she was 12. The same day, scientists from the National CJD Surveillance Unit in Edinburgh confirmed that a 74-year-old man who died last year also suffered from the brain disease. These two cases bring the total number of those diagnosed with Human BSE in the UK to 85, of whom 82 have died.

All previous known victims were aged between 12 and 55, and confirmation that a 74-year-old has been struck down by Human BSE could dramatically increase the total numbers who may eventually die from the disease. Government adviser Professor Roy Anderson told the press, "we are in the process of taking into account the rise of the numbers in the light of a considerably broader age range."

Yet the findings of the official Inquiry into BSE published on October 26 finds no one was to blame for the emergence of this crisis. The incoming Labour government in 1997 set up the Inquiry, headed by senior judge Lord Phillips, and its two-year investigation has cost £27m. The 16-volume, 4,000-page report he has produced does not make any criticisms of the food industry, whose practices lie at the heart of the scandal. In answer to a question at the press conference launching his report, Lord Phillips said the meat industry had come out of the crisis "relatively unscathed". He went on to describe the supermarket chains as a "force for good."

Labour's Agriculture Minister Nick Brown presented parliament with the findings of the Inquiry, going out of his way to avoid any criticism of his Conservative predecessors, who were in office when the number of instances of BSE reached its peak. He quoted Lord Phillips' verbatim saying, "The Government did not lie to the public about BSE," because when Ministers told the public that "beef is safe to eat", they believed what they were saying.

The Conservative and Labour Parties have declared a mutual political amnesty, preferring to shift the blame onto those government scientists and civil servants who advised them.

They can do this only because Lord Phillips report is a whitewash. It contains some praise and only the mildest of criticism for those politicians and public servants whose actions and inactions are implicated in what is Britain's worst-ever food safety crisis. "We have concluded that, in general, our system of public administration has emerged with credit from the part of the BSE story that we have examined." In the report itself, Lord Phillips writes, "any who have come to our report hoping to find villains and scapegoats should go away disappointed."

The real purpose of the Phillips Inquiry, and the thrust of its "lessons,"

is to restore and maintain public confidence in the government, and especially its pronouncements on health and food safety.

The report is replete with references to "shortcomings", "bureaucratic processes", "breakdowns of communications", "inadequate interdepartmental liaison", "unacceptable delays", "failures of communications," "lack of urgency" etc. The one thing absent from the document is any concrete attribution of responsibility for the crisis.

Everything is explained as the result of "mistakes", errors of judgement or bad advice. But all concerned are deemed to have had only the most honourable intentions: "The Government was preoccupied with preventing an alarmist over-reaction to BSE because it believed that the risk [to humans] was remote. It is now clear that this campaign of reassurance was a mistake. When on 20 March 1996 the Government announced that BSE had probably been transmitted to humans, the public felt that they had been betrayed. Confidence in government pronouncements about risk was a further casualty of BSE."

According to Lord Phillips, BSE and its human equivalent were completely unforeseeable and unpreventable. Like some terrible natural disaster, the BSE/CJD crisis was without culprits, it "just happened". And yet, buried in the thousands of pages is evidence that compels a completely different verdict to be reached.

From the very start, government policy was directed towards preserving "confidence" in the British beef industry. The report acknowledges, for example, that, "Events after March 1987 demonstrated a policy of restricting dissemination of information about BSE. The principal reason for this was concern about 'the possible effect on exports and the political implications' should news get out that a possible TSE [Transmissible Spongiform Encephalopathy] in cattle had been discovered in Britain."

Whatever Ministers did or did not know about the risks to human health, their major policy consideration was to protect the UK agribusiness, as Lord Phillips is forced to acknowledge. His report notes that in 1986, "output of milk, fattened cattle and calves (at 1990 prices) was worth £5,134 million, contributing 60 per cent of the total value of livestock products in the UK and 37.5 per cent of the UK's total agricultural output. In 1995 [after BSE] output of these products had declined to £4,681 million (at 1990 prices), contributing 53 per cent of the total value of livestock products and 33 per cent of the value of total agricultural output."

The report finds that BSE developed into an epidemic as a consequence of what it calls "intensive farming practice—the recycling of animal protein in ruminant feed." Phillips concludes, however, that since the use of such feed, in the form of "Meat and Bone Meal" (MBM) produced in the rendering process, had occurred since at least the 1940s, nothing could have prevented the emergence of BSE. Since the active disease agent—the prion protein—was largely unaffected by the rendering process.

But within the mass of data contained in the report can be found the economic considerations that encouraged cattle and dairy farmers to vastly increase the amount of MBM they gave their cows: "The emphasis on

increasing milk production led to the use of MBM in place of some of the cheaper vegetable proteins, which had been the main protein source up until then. From about 1982 the least cost formulation of rations manufactured for dairy cows recommended the inclusion of substantial amounts of MBM," the reports states.

A single firm, Prosper De Mulder (PDM), which processed around 64 per cent of red meat waste in England and Wales and 80 per cent of poultry waste, dominates the UK rendering industry. In Scotland, William Forrest and Son (Paisley) Ltd had about 71 per cent of the red meat waste supply. The feed producers (where a near monopoly also operates) would mix the MBM with other ingredients to make the compound feeds sold to farmers. In this industry as well, the emphasis is on maximum profit for the lowest outlay.

When the role of contaminated MBM became clear in spreading the BSE agent, the government eventually banned its use in ruminant feeds. However, as the report notes, "the Government gave the animal feed trade a 'period of grace' of some five weeks to clear existing stocks of feed before the ban took effect. Some members of the feed trade continued to clear stocks after the ban came into force. Farmers in their turn used up the stocks that they had purchased. This led to thousands of animals being infected after the ruminant feed ban came into force on 18 July 1988," says the report. It does not single out any of the renderers or the feed compounders for penalty or sanction.

Just as Lord Phillips ignores the economic imperatives that have facilitated the BSE crisis, so he downplays the political context in which it occurred. Successive Conservative governments since that of Margaret Thatcher in 1979 had made swingeing cuts in state spending and freed industry, including agriculture, from state regulation. This free-market ethos was extended to science, with universities and research institutions expected to look to "market forces" to provide them with an increasing proportion of their budgets. As a result, between 1979 and 1997, the number of scientists engaged in research into agriculture and food was slashed from 3,417 to 2,003. And yet Lord Phillips writes, "After some initial delay, BSE research was adequately funded by the Government.

In truth, far more money was expended in compensation schemes for destroying cattle than on research into both BSE and its human variant. Up until the most recent period, victims of vCJD and their families did not receive a penny in compensation.

It is a matter of public record that Conservative Ministers queued up to tell the public that beef was safe to eat. This reached the obscene spectacle of Agriculture Minister John Gummer virtually forcing his own daughter to eat a burger in front of the press, to "prove" there was no problem with beef. The measures that were introduced were usually subjected to months of delays as various committees, both of government scientists, civil servants and politicians, mulled over the fine print.

Yet the report generally praises the government for going further than its advisers suggested, such as in the case of the Specified Bovine Offal ban imposed in June 1989. This prevented certain parts of the cow believed to harbour the most infectivity—brain, spinal cord, spleen, thymus, tonsils and intestines—from being used in human food.

The report's one criticism is that during the consultation process, concerns were raised about the practicality of ensuring the removal of all of the spinal cord during the abattoir processes. Officials from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF) discounted these concerns without subjecting them to rigorous consideration, the report complains, "in particular no advice was sought as to the minimum quantity of spinal cord that might transmit the disease in food."

The report confirms, "a cow can become infected with BSE as a result of eating an amount of infectious tissue as small as a peppercorn."

The greatest danger of such scraps entering the human food chain, moreover, comes from the practice of mechanically recovered meat or MRM, where high pressure water hoses are used to clean carcasses and

the slurry is then used in cheap burgers, pies, sausages and ready-made meals. It was not until 1995 that action was finally taken in relation to MRM.

Neither can the politicians be excused on the basis that they were merely badly advised. For they chose which advice to accept and which to reject. From the very early days of the BSE crisis, there were several high-profile scientists who publicly voiced their concerns about the emergence of this new disease and its implications for human health. Professor Richard Lacey, a leading microbiologist, was subjected to defamation and personal attacks by the media, farmers, the food industry and politicians. Dr Harash Narang, who had worked to develop a urine test for BSE, was subject to intimidation and his dismissal engineered.

Labour set up the Phillips Inquiry in such a way to ensure it would not uncover the truth about BSE. The Inquiry had no powers to subpoena witnesses or demand the production of documents.

Lord Phillips controlled all the questioning of witnesses, effectively muzzling those acting for the families of Human BSE victims from cross-examining them. At the very outset, Phillips stressed that his Inquiry "is not to attribute blame for what occurred but to identify what went wrong and why, and to see what lessons can be learnt."

Its terms of reference limited its investigation from the outbreak of BSE to the announcement on March 20, 1996 when Tory Health Minister Stephen Dorrell admitted to parliament that there was a link between BSE in cattle and vCJD in humans. Thus it would not cover any of the measures Labour introduced since winning the general election in May 1997. In office, Labour ensured the Meat and Livestock Commission launched a multi-million pound advertising campaign to encourage the consumption of British beef, which was declared "the safest in the world," and was reintroduced into school meals.

MAFF was clearly implicated in the scandal from the start and acted with an almost knee-jerk response to protect the interests of the powerful agribusiness lobby. Yet Lord Phillips' claims it did not "lean in favour of the agricultural producers to the detriment of the consumer." However, to try and show it was taking "consumer interest" seriously, Labour has set up the largely toothless "Food Standards Agency".

The Blair government has also promised special aid to assist the care of those suffering from Human BSE and payments of compensation to the families of those who have lost their loved ones to vCJD. However, this offer is made while simultaneously seeking to ensure that the families drop any legal proceedings that may not only have awarded higher payments but possibly penalised those responsible. No corporation, civil servant or government officials face any penalties as a result of the BSE Inquiry.

The Phillips report, despite the wealth of empirical evidence it contains, thus continues the cover-up that began as soon as BSE emerged.

In May 1997, the Socialist Equality Party in Britain convened a Workers Inquiry into the BSE/CJD crisis. It was the first independent investigation into this public health disaster, and brought together all aspects of the crisis. Six Commissioners, who presented their findings in July the same year, heard testimony from scientific experts, health and environmental professionals, as well as the relatives of those who had died, or were dying, from vCJD.

The central conclusions of the Commissioners' findings were:

1. The cause of vCJD is eating beef and beef-derived products from BSE infected cattle.
2. The BSE/CJD crisis was both foreseeable and preventable. Its source is the production of food for profit.
3. The Tory government, civil service, handpicked advisory bodies and the press covered up the crisis and enabled the disease to spread. The methods of the cover-up included intimidating critics and whipping up nationalism.
4. The Labour Party and the trade unions were complicit in the cover-up

and are continuing it now Labour is in government.

5. The capitalist politicians' refusal to take the necessary emergency action means that many more lives are in danger, via both infected meat and the environment.

6. This indifference to public health is part of a broader policy in which all social concerns are subordinated to the dictates of the market.

With considerably less resources than were available to Lord Phillips and his team, the Workers Inquiry convened by the Socialist Equality Party was able to rapidly establish the cause of the BSE crisis and point to those responsible. It was able to do this because it was informed by a critical attitude to the present social order.

“The BSE/vCJD crisis did not simply result from the corruption and hypocrisy of a few government ministers and civil servants. Their actions and inactions were determined by their defence of an economic system, which subordinates every aspect of human life to the drive for profits. The cover-up begun by the Tory government, and Labour's collusion with it, reveal how Parliament and the establishment parties are the political means through which this economic set-up is preserved.” (From: “*Human BSE* —Anatomy of a health disaster: Record of the Workers Inquiry” <http://www.socialequality.org.uk/bse-o23.shtml>)

The findings of the Workers Inquiry have been vindicated once again by the failure of the Phillips inquiry to seriously address the wider social issues raised by the BSE/vCJD, or propose any genuine measures to combat the spread of this lethal disease.

See Also:

BSE/CJD & Food Safety Issues

[WSWS Full Coverage]



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