

## FOOD FOR THOUGHT



Sometimes a couple of individuals, who are not in the national spotlight, can highlight political issues more effectively than exchanges taking place in parliament. So it is with John Hughes and Christine Shawcroft. Neither figure in television news coverage. Both, however, offer more important pointers for the future than any of the wannabe Prime Ministers.

John Hughes is Catering Manager of the Nottingham Combined University Hospitals Trust. He would concede that he cuts no Che Guavara figure. John has rounder, softer features than Che, and no known interest in motorcycles. He has, however, brought about a minor revolution in the hospital.

John threw out the 'cook-chill' catering suppliers, saving the hospital around £1million in the process. He replaced his food sourcing with a network of 350 suppliers from local farms around the East Midlands. In doing so he doubled the nutritional standard of hospital food, lowered the carbon footprint of their food supplies and provided vital lifelines to local farming communities in the area. The economic and health gains only increase as the scheme expands.

The global significance of this is that we are entering an era in which localised food security is going to be a massive issue for any government in power. The world was given early notice of this in 2008, before 'casino' economics brought everything to its knees. At that time there were massive spikes in the price of all primary crops. Some of this was precipitated by subsidies offered in the USA, promoting bio-fuels rather than food production. The result was tortilla riots in Mexico and spiralling prices of cereals worldwide. Tempting as it may be to blame all this on George Bush, the real problem is that the strongest correlation is really between global food prices and the price of oil. This has remained consistent throughout both the boom years and the crash. Today's price of oil stands at \$80 a barrel. It is already on track to rise above \$100 over the coming months. Food prices will follow suit.

There are various recent studies on how global food production could feed a population of over 9 billion people by 2050. John Beddington, the Government's Chief Scientist produced a report suggesting that world food production will need to increase by between 70 and 100% to feed these numbers. It comes at a time when current global food production levels are set to plateau around 2017. The figures no longer stack up.

Some of the fundamental assumptions about globalised food markets are set to break down. Climate change, water shortages and soil fertility will see to this as much as population growth. What we produce, and how we produce it, will become a matter of towering political importance. Neither ministers nor civil servants will find cover in the smokescreen answer "there is plenty of food out there". They will need a coherent approach to UK food security. How we manage our own land, food and soil resources will become central to this.

In practical terms, what John Hughes has been doing within his hospital mirrors what the Soil Association and Slow Food Movement have been arguing for years. As oil prices start to rise, someone has to come up with a plan for post-oil agriculture. Inescapably, any such plan takes you closer to both regionalised and seasonalised food systems. There is much to be gained from such a transition, however much it upsets those who own today's cartel of multi-commodity trading in food.

One of the modern myths about globalised food trade is that it would lift the poor, in the developing world, out of their poverty. Anyone looking into the detail of the 200,000 farm suicides in India, or the tribal conflicts in Africa – where people are killing each other over water shortages whilst still exporting food to the North – will understand that globalisation and liberation are actually strangers to one another. At some point the poor will begin to insist on the right to feed themselves, before they feed us. Quite right.

The last century was no stranger to food shortages. What we have forgotten is the way in which nations managed their way through crises by having much more interventionist policies in agriculture; politics controlled and directed food markets and food production. Whatever happens in the exchanges between Gordon Brown and David Cameron, Britain will have to revisit this history and re-engage with interventionist policies to deliver UK food security.

It's at this point that Christine Shawcroft takes over from John Hughes. Party members know Christine as a member of Labour's National Executive Committee, and someone actively seeking selection as a parliamentary candidate. Christine has been an impressive candidate in the past. With the departure of so many Labour MPs, you would have thought Christine was a certain candidate for what may remain of the Labour's safe seats. What stands in the way is her outstanding record as a socialist.

This isn't a problem for party members, or for the public. The problem is getting past the Party machine. Labour HQ now chooses the shortlist for all vacant seats and Christine cannot get a look-in. Instead we have one of the biggest parachuting exercises since D-Day. There are celebrities galore and kids from Downing Street with no track record of engagement in serious national politics of any sort. Many have a closer identification with the problems of puberty than poverty. The implications for the Labour Party are bleak.


If the election produces a hung parliament, whatever government emerges will be a short-lived one. There will be no government of national unity. Recriminations will begin as soon as the cuts do. As soon as a government majority is lost, Britain will face a second general election. Labour will have little chance of success in it if all that is on offer is a kinder set of cuts. The party must use the coming election as a watershed. It has to walk away from the legacy of Blairism and the self-deluding simplicities of New Labour.

Sooner, rather than later, there has to be a fundamental rethink of Labour politics. Food security, energy security, water management and the social infrastructures that hold society together, are the keys to reclaiming public trust. They are also the key to economic regeneration and to the delivery of jobs and skills that will reshape the future. The question is 'who will drive this process?'

Excluding people like Christine Shawcroft from Labour's ranks in parliament only carves failure into Labour's future. We have to put people in parliament who can transform the future, not just tap-dance

around the present.

At a grassroots level, there is now far more radicalism to be found in civil society than within Labour's ranks. Without the likes of Christine in Parliament there will be few strong enough to redistribute power and wealth to those who, locally, might then transform the towns and cities we live in.

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