

The Politics of Food

for Islington U3A, June 2020

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Some might argue that food is so important that politics should be kept out of it.

And that food should be kept out of politics, but that profoundly unrealistic ...

The UK system is chronically insecure.

 **CabinetOffice**

Food Matters Towards a Strategy for the 21st Century

The Strategy Unit
July 2008



Government
Office for
Science

 **Foresight**



2011

The Future of Food and Farming:
Challenges and choices for global sustainability

My question is: **how can the UK can
achieve food security?**

Food security requires providing:
sufficient
sustainable
safe
heathy and
equitable food.

The insecure state of the UK's food system, and the world's, has been a consequence, in large part not of population growth, but of socio-economic forces, in combination with governmental and international policies, and corporate strategies.

Those policies need to be changed. But how?

Markets for staple foods are untypical. Supplies can easily fluctuate, eg with weather *or a pandemic*, but levels of demand are rather stable.

If the price of potatoes is halved, few people double their consumption of potatoes; instead they buy the same amount of potatoes more cheaply.

But if the price doubles, they often eat the same amount of potatoes, and spend less on other things.

So, a modest surplus causes prices to tumble, and a modest shortage causes prices to rise sharply.

Economists call food markets notoriously 'price-inelastic'.

Unregulated food markets can be, and historically have been, very volatile insecure.

That occurred in the UK and many other countries, especially in the 19th century.

Eg the corn-hog cycle in the USA, and the Repeal of the Corn Laws in the UK in 1846.

Reluctantly, governments intervened during the two World Wars, and since 1945.

The long-term impact of cost-reducing innovations in the food system, in combination with volatile prices, undermined the terms of trade between rural and urban communities.

Concentration of ownership, since the early 1970s, increased the power of the large retailers and processors, but weakened farmers and consumers.

Many rich countries subsidised their farmers to invest in productivity-enhancing innovations, to stabilise farm incomes, food supplies and prices, while lowering 'costs'.

But they generated surpluses, and caused much ecological harm to eg soil, water, flora and fauna.

Meanwhile rich countries insisted that poor countries did not follow their examples, as that would 'distort market signals'.

For rich farmers, large corporations and OECD governments, the problems are not scarcity but surpluses.

“...if US farm policy...can be thought of as having a theme, it has been to prevent [farmers’] productivity from driving down prices...the tinkering with the market mechanism has been on a scale befitting the world’s wealthiest nation. From Soil Bank to Public Law 480 to drowning baby pigs, little that might elevate prices has not been tried.”

T Poleman, ‘World food: a perspective’, *Science*, May 1975, pp510–518

Policy response since the early 1970s was to unload surpluses at discounted prices to the food processing industry.

It takes cheap and plentiful ingredients and converts them into scarce expensive and nutritionally- and toxicologically-compromised products. Safety and health are not free and often not cheap.

The system provides 'sufficiency' for 'affluent' consumers, but not the poor, esp. not in UDCs.

Two forms of malnutrition co-exist.

Price competition in the food sector has often undermined food security by harming its sustainability, as well as making products unsafe (microbiologically and toxicologically) and unhealthy (nutritionally).

Political responsibility for addressing those problems lies with governments and international organisations, but they have failed, and are failing, to address those problems.

Acute short term risks

- Acute risks are mainly microbiological ie bacteria, viruses and fungi, and some toxic contaminants eg antifreeze, acrylamide, & heavy metals.
- We know how to produce, process, distribute store and prepare food safely.
- There are clear statutory regulations on those matters.

- **But**, there are failures of compliance, and enforcement is under-resourced –

‘The un-inspected deteriorates.’

- There is also: food fraud, eg ‘horsegate’ and risks of new ‘mutant’ (zoonotic) microbes.

It is not just in 'wet markets' with livestock and wildlife in developing countries that new microbial pathogens evolve and emerge, it happens in intensive livestock systems too.

Agricultural intensification and the evolution of host specialism in the enteric pathogen *Campylobacter jejuni*

Evangelos Mourkas^a , Aidan J. Taylor^b, Guillaume Méric^{a,c,d}, Sion C. Bayliss^a, Ben Pascoe^a , Leonardos Mageiros^a, Jessica K. Calland^a , Matthew D. Hitchings^e , Anne Ridley^f, Ana Vidal^f, Ken J. Forbes^g, Norval J. C. Strachan^h, Craig T. Parkerⁱ , Julian Parkhill^j , Keith A. Jolley^k, Alison J. Cody^k , Martin C. J. Maiden^k , David J. Kelly^{b,1,2} , and Samuel K. Sheppard^{a,k,1,2}

Chronic toxicity

- The use of chemicals eg pesticides, food additives, veterinary medicines, is regulated, **but** far too weakly.

eg aspartame and glyphosate.

- There are good reasons to think that the regulations of eg GM products is also too weak.

Hilbeck et al. *Environ Sci Eur* (2020) 32:54
<https://doi.org/10.1186/s12302-020-00325-6>

 Environmental Sciences Europe

REVIEW

Open Access

GMO regulations and their interpretation:
how EFSA's guidance on risk assessments
of GMOs is bound to fail



Angelika Hilbeck^{1,2*}, Hartmut Meyer², Brian Wynne^{2,3} and Erik Millstone^{2,4}

- Our knowledge about chronic toxicity is far poorer than for acute toxicity.
- It derives almost entirely from tests on 'model' organisms eg laboratory animals and microbial and cell culture tests.
- Inferences from the results of tests on animals and bacteria to possible effects on humans are highly uncertain and often compromised.

- Food safety policy-making is complicated because scientific evidence is frequently **incomplete, equivocal** and **uncertain**.
- From 1986 to February 1996, we did not know whether or not BSE could cause CJD.
- The carcinogenic risks from saccharin are quantifiably uncertain (0.22 to 1,144,000, extra cases of cancer in US popl. from ~70mg/cap/day)
- Science does not speak with just one voice.
- Policy can never just 'follow the science'.

Politics of regulatory toxicology

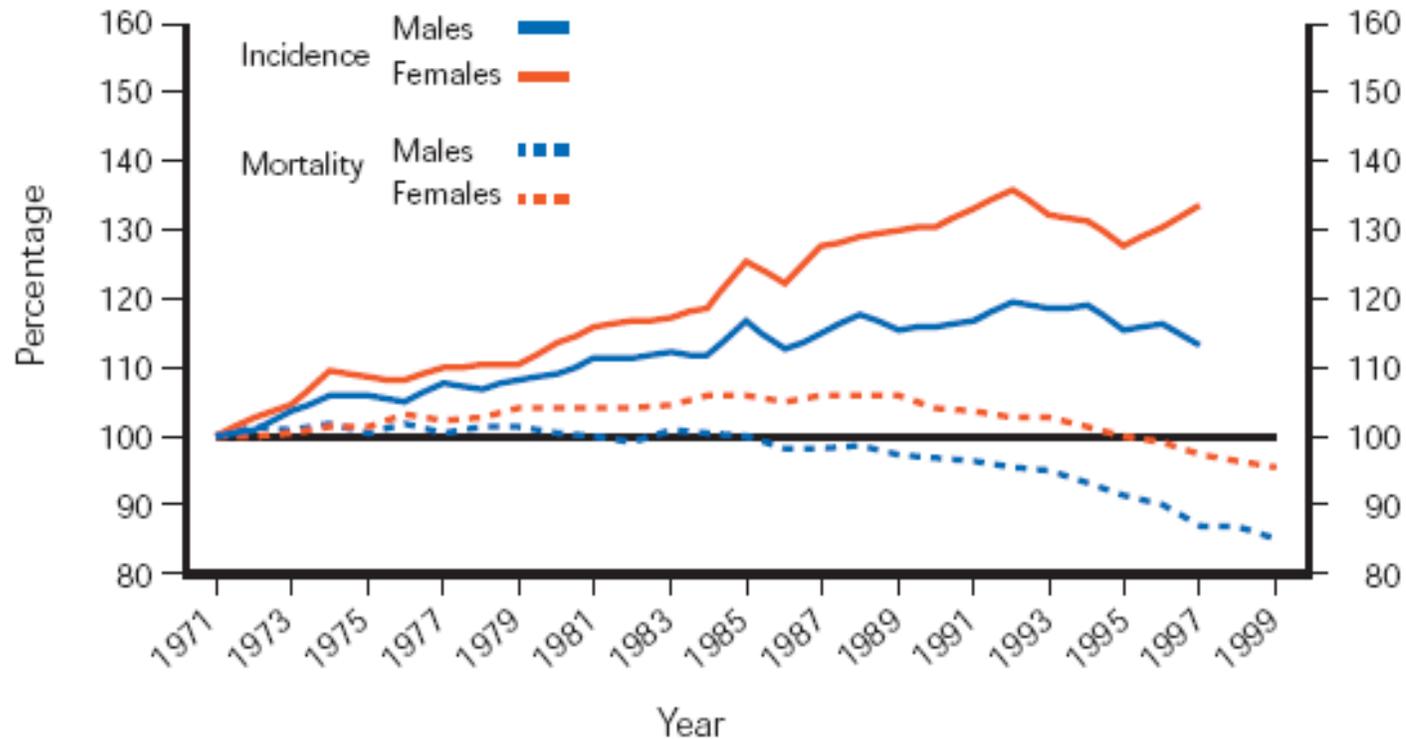
- The roles of 'expert' advisors to the UK, EC/EU, USA and WHO-FAO policy-making has often been perverse: '**consistently inconsistent**'.
- Official 'expert advisors' have often interpreted the results tests as reliable when reassuring, but unreliable when they are worrying.

ANS panel's interpretation of the reliability of **Aspartame** studies for those that had, and had not, indicated possible harm, by number of studies

	Number of studies reviewed	Number treated as reliable	Number treated as unreliable
Studies <i>not</i> indicating possible harm	81	62	19
Studies indicating possible harm	73	0	73

Index of cancer mortality in UK: 1971 - 1997

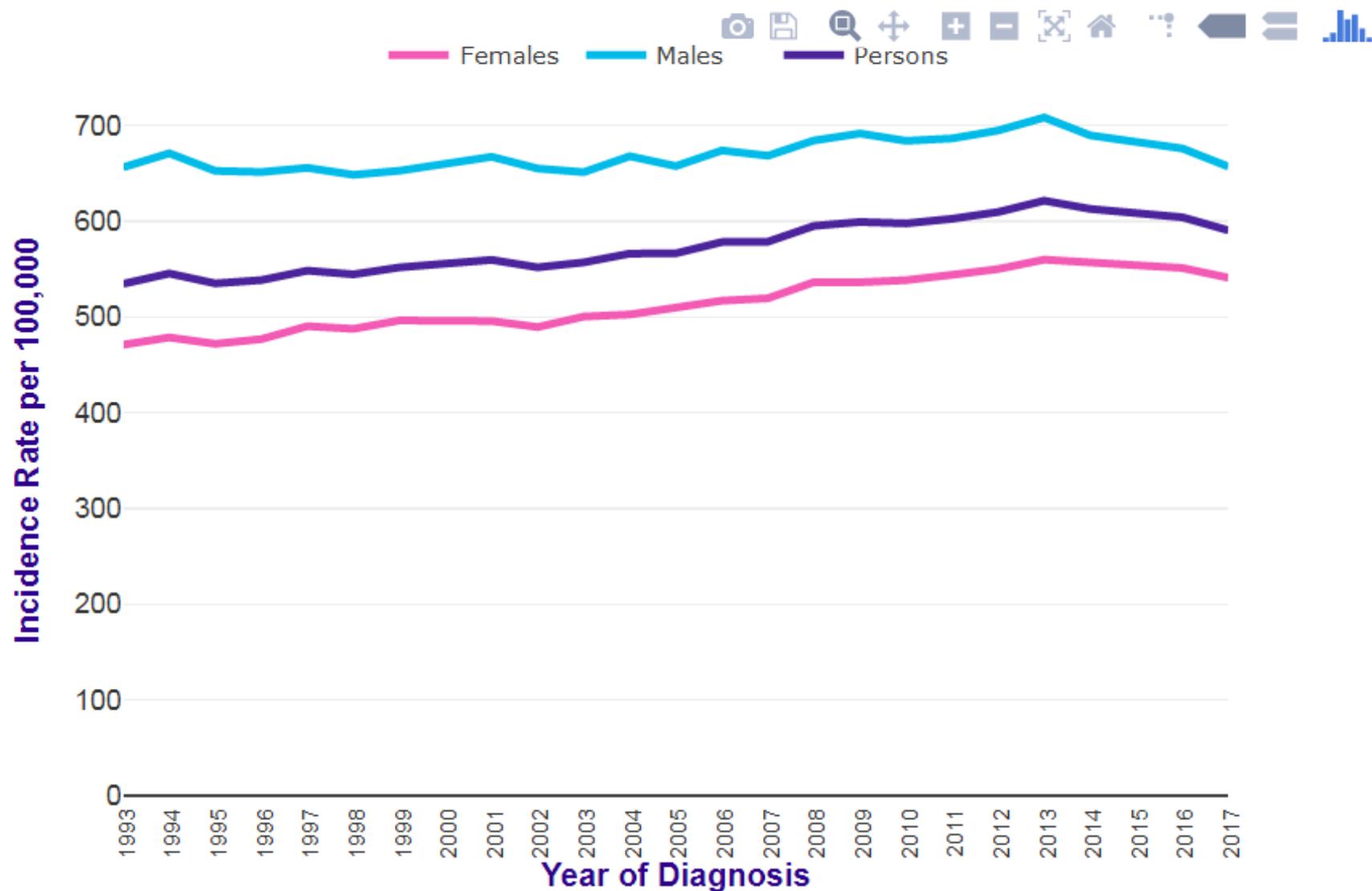
Figure 2.13 Age-standardised incidence of, and mortality from, all cancers[†] by sex, England and Wales, 1971-1999* (1971=100)



[†] All malignant neoplasms excluding non-melanoma skin cancer.

* Figures for incidence for 1995-1997 and mortality for 1999 are provisional.

All Cancers Excluding Non-Melanoma Skin Cancer (ICD-10 C00-97 Excl C44), European Age-Standardised Incidence Rates, UK, 1993-2017



A hard Brexit will aggravate all 5 dimensions of the UK's food security.

- **'Sufficiency' will be less reliable,**
- **Sustainability will be undermined**
- **Safety will be compromised**
- **Health will be harmed, and**
- **The consequences will be even less equitable.**

A free-trade deal with eg the USA, that includes agricultural commodities and food products will lower food safety standards in the UK food industry and in farming, eg:

- **Beef hormones**
- **Recombinant-BST in dairy cows: pus and antibiotics in milk**
- **Antibiotics in livestock with residues in meat**
- **GM crops and foods, including gene edited products**
- **Disinfectant-drenched meat**
- **HFCS.**

Those innovations will not be welcomed by UK or EU consumers.

I'm fed up being dictated to by the EU, I'd much rather be dictated to by the US!



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The UK, and all other countries both industrialised and under-developed, need to explicitly address the interests, values and choices inherent in food and agricultural policy. They should deliver on the Sustainable Devt Goals

2: Zero Hunger

3: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages and

12: Ensure sustainable consumption and production.

To reach those goals, the UK will need to develop and implement a food security strategy that delivers and reconciles all 5 dimensions of food security, without undermining food security in the countries with which the UK trades.

Globally, we need radical transformations too, including land-redistribution, market stabilisation measures, and 'sustainable' development.