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Britain

Burying British Farming?

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Since mid-March, day and night, pyres have been burning in the British countryside. Piles (some up to 130 feet high) of animal carcasses in open fields, heaped helter-skelter on rubber tyres and railway sleepers, charred by flames that fill the air with the stench of burning flesh and smoke, choking nearby residents.

Foot and mouth disease, that first came to light on February 19, is regarded by some as the final blow to an agricultural sector still reeling from the bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) catastrophe (better known as 'mad cow disease') of a few years ago.

Andrew O'Hagan warned, "the new epidemic was but an acceleration of a certain decline ... it is difficult to imagine British farming surviving in any of its traditional forms".

It also threw out of kilter New Labour's choreographed plan to call an early general election on May 03. The Government postponed the poll, claiming people in quarantined areas would be unable to participate in the electoral process, but really so as not to lose political capital from appearing insensitive to the state of mourning in rural areas the length and breadth of the land. The only silver lining for the Government was the cancellation of the Countryside Alliance demonstration planned for March 18.

This right-wing organisation "campaigning for the countryside, country sports and the rural way of life" had threatened to bring 500,000 people on the streets of London to protest against the Labour government's perceived urban bias and opposition to rural 'traditions' such as fox-hunting with dogs.

Foot and Mouth Disease

'Foot and mouth' is a highly infectious viral disease affecting pigs, sheep, cattle and goats causing blistering lesions on their hooves, mouth, tongue, and muzzle. It is not life-threatening to humans, unlike BSE, and is even not necessarily fatal to infected animals. Only a small percentage of animals usually the very young, very old and sickly will die through weakened resistance to disease through loss of appetite.

In spite of a few scares no humans have contracted illness in this outbreak and only a handful of slaughter-men through exposure to animal blood have fallen ill complaining of short-lived flu-like symptoms. There have been outbreaks of FMD in all parts of Britain including Scotland, and in Northern Ireland too. However it has been most concentrated in the English counties of Cumbria and Devon, which are also major tourist destinations.

How do we explain the rapid spread and dispersal of FMD? "Any epidemic is both the cause and the consequence of a precise historical moment," Ignacio Ramonet reminds us, and "Britain has been a laboratory of ultra liberalism for the past 20 years" (Le Monde Diplomatique, April 2001).

Intensive industrial farming means that livestock and dairy farming in Britain is dominated by the compulsion to increase productivity, reduce costs, ensure year-round supply and find markets abroad, while under the thrall of giant superstores which retail produce.

Livestock markets and abattoirs (slaughter-houses) have reduced in number and geographical distribution, as the imperative to find 'economies of scale' is increasingly difficult to resist. In a grotesque ritual live animals are subjected to the trauma of confinement in small spaces for hours on end and trucked in heavy goods vehicles that contribute to road congestion and greenhouse gas emissions. Through unclean conditions and contamination in these vehicles, as well as in abattoirs, disease is spread.

The absurdity is that these vehicles criss-cross the country transporting processed meat and dairy to the very places they originated. Meanwhile rural communities lose the employment and income from local sale, slaughter, and preparation of meat.

The major perpetrators and beneficiaries of this practice are the supermarkets who George Monbiot argues in his new book, *Captive State: The Corporate Takeover of Britain*, have producers in a stranglehold. The supermarket chains demand centralised delivery and processing of produce - a further reason why animals are moved hundreds of miles for sale and slaughter. Adding insult to injury the former livestock markets with their prime location are often taken over by supermarkets for new branches that drive local small businesses into bankruptcy.

In its ham-handed attempts to suppress the spread of infection the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Maff) only contributed to the crisis ridden atmosphere in the countryside. Maff ordered farms, even those free from FMD to be off-limits, footpaths to be cordoned off, and urban dwellers instructed to not visit. "The countryside is closed", announced the mass media, with farmers and politicians alike in solemn agreement. Movement within country areas was also discouraged. Many farmers were stranded on farms, instructed not to leave them, or to receive visitors for fear of spreading the virus.

However in many areas, especially Devon and Cumbria, the tourist trade is far more important to the local economy than farming. The ban on tourists, the negative publicity abroad and the alarmism encouraged by the Government was particularly badly timed, coming as it did at the beginning of the Easter holiday season.

Killing frenzy

As reports of FMD predictably accelerated, panic grew in Maff, unleashing a killing frenzy on its part. There are broadly two strategies against FMD: 'stamping out' or mass slaughter, and vaccination. From the onset, Maff dismissed vaccination as an option.

Instead it was resolved that not only infected animals but those within 3 km of outbreaks and therefore at risk of contracting the virus would be slaughtered. Initial estimates were 125,000, later revised upwards to 800,000 by the end of March. At last count some 2.7 million sheep, cows, pigs and goats including rare breeds and household pets have already been or will be killed. The official justification for this enormous organised massacre of healthy animals is to create a 'firebreak' protecting uninfected herds from infection. Meanwhile as of May 13, three months into the epidemic, there had been only 1,593 'confirmed' cases of foot and mouth.

Even this number is an over-estimate. It was revealed recently, after testing of FMD cases, that something like only 70% may actually have had the virus (*Independent*, May 11 2001). A combination of inexperienced veterinary surgeons and over-zealous Maff officials had apparently misdiagnosed hundreds of cases, thinking it better to slaughter first and conduct laboratory tests later.

Why was vaccination not considered? For the same reason it had been abandoned in the first place. In 1990 the

European Union, following Maff lobbying, ended the mandatory vaccination of animals for FMD. The reason being to preserve 'disease-free' status for British meat exports, as vaccination creates suspicion that the animals may have been or were under threat of infection allowing other countries to ban those imports.

Vaccines in use create antibodies that replicate those produced by the virus and some tests cannot distinguish between immunised and infected livestock. So rather than risk loss of export markets, Maff preferred to risk infection of animals including through import of animals from abroad which might themselves be diseased. Its only 'solution' to an outbreak was to slaughter healthy animals, instead of a mass vaccination programme, so that Britain can soon after the mass cull regain 'disease-free' status .

Indian eco-feminist, Vandana Shiva, expressed the outrage of critics of this strategy: "This war against farm animals reflects the insanity of those who promote globalised, industrialised food systems which create, promote and spread disease, but who simultaneously want a 'disease free national herd'" (Guardian, April 04 2001).

Export

Indeed it is the compulsion to export that has dictated the handling of this disaster - not the welfare of the animals or even a long-term policy for farmers and the rural economy. Yet, as the contribution of agriculture to national income has fallen from Â£6 billion in 1995 to Â£1.8 billion in 2000, so has the value of meat and dairy exports to a mere Â£630 million last year, of which meat exports were Â£310 million.

Meanwhile in what Caroline Lucas, Green MEP [Member of European Parliament] calls "the great food swap": Britain imports 61,400 tonnes of poultry meat from the Netherlands in the same year that it exports 33,100 tonnes of poultry meat to the Netherlands. Britain imports 240,000 tonnes of pork and 125,000 tonnes of lamb while exporting 195,000 tonnes of pork and 102,000 tonnes of lamb .

Our supermarket freezers have Argentine beef and New Zealand lamb when at the same time British beef and lamb is exported to other European Union countries where the public is rightly reluctant to consume it. The economic case for meat exports is increasingly difficult to make when it makes greater sense to concentrate on production for the national market.

Farmers

Where one might have expected some protest against this barbaric slaughter of animals from among farmers, the National Farmers Union (NFU) - the only trade union with which New Labour willingly associates - vociferously supported Maff, and when the Government came under pressure to begin limited vaccination, refused to co-operate.

The Times (May 04 2001) editorialised, "the intimate relationship between MAFF and the National Union of Farmers meant that an interest group secured an influence not witnessed since the 1970s". However the NFU while its membership is mainly of small farmers has ignored greater support among them for vaccination, and selective instead of mass culling that is favoured by large farmers who dominate its structures and leadership.

One sheep farmer told the Guardian (April 19 2001), "[The NFU] put forward the views of the 20% of big farmers who get 80% of the subsidies, not family farms under 200 acres ...". The problem in the farming sector is that its economy

(and morality) has been corrupted by the European Union's subsidy regime and the compensation culture of the Ministry of Agriculture.

Over 46% of the EU budget is allocated not to salaries and bureaucratic institutions as the xenophobic tabloid press would like us to believe, but to agricultural subsidies and price support policies in the guise of the Common Agricultural Policy. It is the subsidy regime that has restructured post-war farming which determines the livestock that is bred, the crops that are planted, and the fields that lie fallow.

Under the present system farmers had two options: once animals became infected or were vaccinated they would inevitably lose their export market and have to bear the economic loss of animals that survive but with reduced value, because livestock weight is reduced and the milk yield is less, or, they could slaughter their animals and receive 100% compensation from the Government regardless of whether those animals were infected or not. Unsurprisingly farmers chose to grab the money on offer, by sacrificing healthy animals, and use it to restock, diversify into something else, or take early retirement. Animal welfare and a humane attitude towards animals have been "totally subordinated to an economic rationale of productivity, efficiency and export markets from which almost no one demurs ... our accommodation with the market has so numbed us that we can see no other way of viewing the world and its occupants", observed Madeleine Bunting (Guardian, March 31 2001).

It is staggering to compare the ease with which governments past and present hand out money to farmers, including in the BSE crisis caused by farmers feeding livestock remains of other animals to reduce their feed costs, when Labour is utterly indifferent to the thousands of car-workers at Rover (in Birmingham), Ford (in Dagenham), Vauxhall (in Luton), steelworkers at Corus (in South Wales and Scunthorpe) and mobile telephone workers at Motorola (in Bathgate) who have lost their livelihood in recent months with only hand-wringing from Ministers.

The Government has also resisted appeals from rural hoteliers and small businesses for compensation packages similar to those extended to farmers though the former estimate the loss to them at Â£22.2 billion. Thus far its 'aid' package for the rural sector consists mainly of tax deferrals, EU money and loans.

Opposition

There has been no parliamentary opposition to the Government's strategy in dealing with foot and mouth disease.

The Conservatives, the party of God, Queen and Country, had only one refrain: operation control of the mass culling should be removed from the Ministry of Agriculture and handed over to the Armed Forces. In fact 'New Labour', never slow to borrow as much as they can from their predecessor in government, had already introduced armed forces personnel for logistical duties and to accelerate the slaughter and disposal policy.

The notion that a civilian administration should be subordinated to the military is typical of Tory politicians, who grow up playing with toy soldiers and now want to play with real soldiers too.

The only political party taking a clear position against mass culling and for vaccination is the Greens, who are also critics of industrial farming and the EU's globalised agriculture and food policy. However its only campaign proposal is the astonishing suggestion that "we should take a minute to think about what is going on, stopping the country for a minute at midday every Tuesday" until the Government changes its mind. No wonder the Green Party has few adherents among the anti-corporate globalisation movement.

The mainstream environmental organisations have been either disinterested or conciliatory towards the Ministry of Agriculture. Some such as the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) have actually supported the 'stamping out' strategy while others such as Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace have been more preoccupied with the Bush administration's withdrawal from the Kyoto Treaty on Climate Change and trials of Genetically Modified crops than the welfare of farm animals. The animal rights movement that has been so prominent against foxhunting and targeting research laboratories and scientists against animal testing has been invisible and silent on this issue. Only the Small and Family Farmers Association and the Soil Association [organising organic farmers] have supported vaccination and criticised the mass slaughter policy.

Populace

Among the populace there has been unease but as the Times (May 04 2001) noted, "the public has been willing to award the Government the benefit of the doubt on foot-and-mouth. It has treated the disease as a form of strange natural disaster which politicians, understandably, have struggled to match".

Public passivity was unsurprising in the face of no clearly articulated opposition to the Government within or outside Parliament. The rate of mass culling peaked in the first two weeks of April leaving tens of thousands of carcasses rotting in the open and a greater health hazard than when the animals were alive.

Only with the prospect of more pyres to burn animals and bigger pits to bury the rest did local people begin asking questions on the public health implications. The Ministry of Agriculture and local government fumbled for an answer.

While neither FMD nor vaccination pose dangers to humans, the disposal phase of the mass slaughter policy does. Burning emits dioxins and carcinogens into the atmosphere causing human birth defects and hormonal changes in wildlife, while the amateurish burial of animals in fields, releases bacterial pollution into the surface and ground water supply which humans and animals use. The contamination to farmland is so serious that it may be unsafe for cultivation for years ahead.

By mid-April the first co-ordinated actions began as some communities protested against the mass burnings and against the location of pyres as well as burial pits near their homes. Across the country, from Northumberland to Devon and Cumbria to Brecon, there were blockades of sites, roadside protests and picketing of local government offices objecting to the method and location of disposal.

Trouble

Rural communities in Britain are in deep trouble. According to the State of the Countryside Report 1999 "42% of rural parishes had no shop, 43% had no post office, 83% had no doctor, 49% had no school and 75% had no daily bus service". Those most vulnerable to isolation and neglect are the elderly and those without private transport.

Family-run farms of around 150 acres practising mixed [arable and livestock] farming are in decline, as big monoculture industrial farms over 4,000 acres overwhelm them, displacing human labour with greater mechanisation, using land more intensively with artificial fertilisers, chemicals and GMOs.

As urban sprawl expands and rising property prices in cities and towns push people to buy homes in rural areas,

locals are unable to afford housing in their own villages. Farm labourers, many of whom are employed on a casual basis, without the working conditions and rights of organised workers, are paid wages at the derisory minimum rate but in many cases, in clear violation of the law, well below it. The rural workforce has declined by 20% over 20 years creating scarce employment for the young and increasing push-migration for work elsewhere.

Alternatives

A sustainable rural policy, has been outlined by John Lister, Socialist Alliance parliamentary candidate in Oxford East constituency and leading member of the International Socialist Group:

- ▶ Shift subsidies from large farmers to small farmers to encourage organic production;
- ▶ Incentives for small farmers to form co-operatives to share and reduce costs and collectively bargain with food companies;
- ▶ Incentives not to import or transport food that can be grown locally (reducing energy use and pollution);
- ▶ Turnover tax on multinational agribusiness and supermarkets;
- ▶ Raise the national minimum wage to Â£7.40 an hour;
- ▶ Greater regulation and inspection of health and safety procedures at all stages of agricultural production and food processing;
- ▶ Investment in cheap and efficient publicly-owned rural transport - bus and rail;
- ▶ Investment in community facilities, youth clubs, primary schools and environmental projects.

"It is clear that we are winning the battle against foot-and-mouth", said Tony Blair, a few days before announcing the worst kept secret in British politics - the next general election will be on June 07. However the Government admits that new cases are expected into August as fresh outbreaks occur. The last major epidemic in 1967-68 took eight months to run its course. Certainly so far as the Ministry of Agriculture and the National Farmers Union is concerned, the worst of the foot and mouth scourge has certainly been weathered. Nevertheless with farming in a neo-liberal vice and the scandal that is the food-industry, we have reaped only a fraction of what agribusiness has sown.