

# GLOBAL FOOD POLICY: LIKE WINNING A GAME OF POKER ON THE TITANIC?

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## **Abstract**

In order that decisions about global food policy have a more viable future than a game of poker on the Titanic, conversations need to be held about current trends in the food industry. This paper will explore the appropriateness of the current defacto vision (a future characterised by large internationally active companies based on an elite managerial structure, which is highly systematised) and consider our options for the future.

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July 1997

To my dear great grandson,

I am 41 now and your grandfather is not even 2 yet so the chances of our ever meeting, let alone having an adult conversation about the differences in your life experiences versus mine seem to be impossible. Even if technological advancements do achieve what at present seems impossible, I'll probably be an incoherent dribbling mess and unable to share my thoughts and fears with you!

Given these assumptions I would like, through the medium of letters, to take the opportunity to converse with you across time on some of the issues which I can only assume affect you as much as they affect me. This is a rare privilege to be able to do this and I hope it gives you some sense of your past. I know that I would have treasured such an interchange between my own great grandmother and myself. My first letter is on an issue of real concern to me at the moment and, I'm afraid, is a fairly depressing way to start our correspondence. I hope that when you read this you have a good laugh at how wrong I have been. If so, that means that people like your parents and grandparents woke up in time and started to treat global food policy as a serious issue, that they have got it right and that you and the rest of the world have got enough to eat and can choose freely the kinds of foods you wish to eat.

I rate your chances of being at least fairly prosperous highly (currently Australia is referred to as 'the lucky country'), but I have to admit to being less than optimistic about your future based on current attitudes, policies and directions. The frustrating thing is that as things stand at the moment, the world has enough knowledge, skills and resources and is fertile enough to feed everyone who lives on it, but people seem incapable of working together to achieve a common goal. More money and effort seem to be spent on defense and weapons to the detriment of basic human resource distribution and equality, and increasingly, control of this critical resource, food, is located in the hands of the wealthy elite with little if any regard to the impact of their actions on the environment or the rest of humanity.

## **The Titanic**

I decided to call my letter to you, 'Global Food Policy; Like Winning A Game of Poker on the Titanic?' as a means of illustrating my points against a historically significant event that

you may or may not have heard of. The *Titanic* was a supposedly unsinkable ship, which was built in Belfast and launched in 1912. It was owned and operated by the White Star Line and more than 1500 people drowned when it hit an iceberg on its maiden transatlantic voyage. The iceberg tore a hole in the side and it sank in minutes. It was a lavish ship, splendidly decorated and carrying very wealthy passengers. This analogy somehow typifies or characterises the current global situation of my generation: it is likened to this seemingly invincible, highly sophisticated and affluent, highly mobile mass, providing an image of an ideal lifestyle, yet one which is unaware of its own vulnerability.

One small component of the greater whole I liken to is global food policy. For some reason the current approach to global food policy seems to me to have the long-term prospects of a game of poker on the *Titanic*! It seems that we are currently playing (or observing) a game which really can have no winners in the long term, it is simply an illusion of success that will be short-lived for all parties, the players, the observers and the society that created it and had a vested interest in its achievements. I only hope that I am wrong. (I should admit at this point that your great grandfather does not agree with my analogy, saying that the rich will always be winners especially in the short term. We have agreed to differ). I want to explain to you the basis of my fears, which arises out of a particular vision of the future, which is common amongst popular writings about food policy appearing in recent years. This vision unfortunately is, de facto, being accepted as reality.

### **The Global Food System**

Global food policy is about achieving a safe, secure, sufficient, sustainable and nutritious diet for all equitably (Tansley & Worsley, 1995, 6). In recent years it has become much greater than the sum of individual policy statements or targets held by individual countries, organisations or corporations about specific dietary or product goals. With increasing globalisation of the marketplace, the world's food system has moved beyond this and in so doing has become complex and critical. As a system it reflects the prevailing social and economic influences around the world and is a system largely developed, controlled and promoted by economic institutions in rich and powerful nations (similar in status to passengers on the *Titanic*).

One of the outcomes of these developments is that the further a person gets from the food they consume, the more significant the role of each of the key players is in impacting upon and influencing policy. Issues of significance to consumers have shifted radically depending on where they are located in the world and their access to information and power. So many more players are involved in production, processing, distribution, retailing, research and development, marketing, management, finance, trading, legislation, safety, politics, futures speculating, etc. that the needs of people who will purchase the food and the requirements for a comprehensive food policy became harder to guarantee. Additionally as the process becomes more complex and distant, ownership has become concentrated into the hands of a smaller number of transnational corporations.

Additionally it seems that people's awareness of this concentration of power has, for whatever reason, either reduced or not kept pace with the changes. For example, the figure for foreign investment in the food processing industry in Australia currently stands at 80% (Macleay, 1996, 27). Whenever such concentrations occur, discussions on consumer/human rights

(especially the right to choice) become critical. Issues ranging from control, influence, profit and ethical practice, through to exploitation, power and greed, as well as consideration of specific products and technologies, become vitally important topics for consideration.

## **Visions of the Future**

My interest in global food policies and trends began when I reviewed a series of short analytical articles in the journal, *The Economist*, on the status of the food industry from the retailer's and manufacturer's perspective (Dec. 1993). The articles concentrated on the trends perceived to be occurring within the food industry, the perceived shifts in power, the strategies being adopted by what *The Economist* saw as the major players (i.e. the retailers and the manufacturers) and debates on the likely action required for continued growth within the industry.

It became obvious from the articles that if one looked carefully at the discussion in terms of both what was said and what was not said, it soon became evident that a particular view of the future that the food industry will move towards was being implied. The article, entitled 'Food Fundamentalism', for instance, portrays a particular kind of future food scenario which includes the following assumptions:

- People will not cook in the future and if by some strange chance they do, it will simply be to reheat or cook a product produced by someone else;
- Decisions about fitness for consumption will be removed from the individual and located with experts who use scientific and technological systems of control;
- Decisions about the range of foods to be eaten by people will be controlled by a bureaucratic male, white elite located in central locations, having no regard for traditional, regional or local foods or customs;
- People will select food based on value-added and branded images, created by scientific and technological innovation in large international organisations.

The perspective quite clearly set out for the reader is one which sees the food industry as composed of very large, internationally active companies (incorporating many merged and 'taken over' components), whose success is measured by very large monetary gain.

Fascinated by this and the questions it raised, I decided to find out what the food industry's vision of its future was. I reviewed an Annual Report for one of the world's major food manufacturers, *Nestle*, and found virtually the same view being presented. In a parallel study, I attempted, through an analysis of relevant Australian publications (research journals and popular written press), to identify the way that the global food market and its policies were portrayed to the Australian audience (Mahoney, 1997). This study helped me ascertain the levels of interest shown by Australians in global food policies, and see whether there was any degree of concern or impact envisaged on the Australian food industry into the future.

The results of this study showed that of the 2597+ database searches conducted into articles published in Australian sources since 1990 covering global food policies/issues/control and the impact of these on consumers, (local to global) only 46 items matched the parameters of the study. More detailed analysis of the 46 items showed that within that group very few addressed the exact spirit of global food policies as defined earlier in this letter.

So what are the features of this vision of the future that are so troubling? How is it portrayed and what/whom is ignored or denied as a consequence of it? Analysis of the writings dealing with the current status of the food industry, plans for future developments, strategic and policy documents etc, all seem in essence to have 4 common premises underpinning them. These, by their very nature, will therefore pre-empt a particular kind of future.

#### **Four Weaknesses of the Vision of Food Futures**

1. The food industry is characterised by features of high modernity and the future scenario represented is one of a continuation or even strengthening of this vision.

This was explained by Harvey as the monopoly of universal modernism's vision of the world. Generally perceived as positivistic, technocentric and rationalistic, universal modernism has been identified with the belief in linear progress, absolute truths, the rational planning of ideal social orders, and the standardisation of knowledge and production. (Harvey, 1992, 9).

As an example, the *Nestle* Annual Report illustrated this image clearly when it provided a background to its progress in the previous year.

These results, all the more notable since they were obtained in a morose economic climate, confirm the appropriateness of our long-term strategy and of the increased efforts made in the areas of research, of management development and of marketing. From an organisational point of view, the measures taken at the Centre, as well as in our operational companies, have also borne fruit in 1992. Reinforcing decentralisation, rationalisations, the creation of strategic business units have, in particular, improved flexibility, fostered entrepreneurial thinking at all levels and speeded up decision making and implementation. These measures place the Group in a favourable position to confront an ever-increasing competition, both globally and in individual segments. (1993, 2)

The term 'the Group' referred to a company with 218,005 personnel, 482 factories and sales of \$38,380 million! The company utilises a centralised system based on an elite managerial structure. The photograph of the Group' Management team on page 3 of the report showed 11 men, all white, all wearing the same style grey or dark grey suits, all of roughly the same age. Similarly, none of the Board of Directors or Economic Advisors was female. The system used by such companies is described as being highly systematised, being able to control inputs and outputs and predict future trends before they happen and respond to them. This degree of certainty and elitist authority is linked to the use of 'expert' men who can 'confidently predict' the uncertainty of the solution. Economic and social consequences of such a vision are controlled through careful use of language, for instance 'revamping', which obviously means job losses. Success is measured in terms of sales and only malfunctions within the prescribed system could cause it to fail.

One is left questioning where this vision leaves people in the future? Such a view though global, is exclusive and elitist. Who does this view exclude? What of local knowledge? Where do small-scale producers, farmers, suppliers, deliverers from local to regional level, fit

within picture? What is the role of the consumer or person who has a need for food? How do they fit such a view?

The final point for instance, totally discounts the possibility for any other involvements such as: action by people who purchase food to move away from branded goods returning to cheaper alternatives; a rise in the popularity of organic foods; or a move to products that people have produced themselves. If such a vision becomes de facto reality then it is clear that power and knowledge will be retained by such a managerial elite to the detriment of women, the elderly, the poor, those living on the fringes of society, etc.

2. As a consequence of the first premise, the food industry places faith in science and technology to achieve its future.

Heavy emphasis is placed on expert knowledge, research and development and technical systems. Perhaps the most astounding reliance on the certainty of experts was described in another of *The Economist* articles when it discussed the food industry's response to the Chernobyl nuclear disaster which happened early in the 1980s. To reassure the reader, the article explained how scientists from the Heinz company tested the soil to make sure it was safe from radioactivity and nuclear fallout. I was struck by the irony of such a situation. Ultimately, it appears we must rely on the knowledge of the scientists, the same experts on whom we relied to stop the Chernobyl disaster from ever occurring in the first place.

The use of expert committees to advise on issues of food regulation, safety, nutrition, labeling etc, is common at all levels, nationally and internationally. Invariably these panels are composed of scientists, technologists and industrialists with little input from people who purchase or prepare food, or from consumer organisations. The long-term danger of this approach is in the way solutions are advocated as arising out of dependence on knowledge of internal expert systems. What about other outcomes or conclusions which could be achieved with an analysis not based purely on expert groups from within? Such an approach can mean that there will be an attempt to solve a problem with a solution that caused the problem in the first place. Additionally, the recent application of computer technology can imply that a solution or strategy will be more effective or successful simply because computers have been used in the creation of the solution. What of people who have limited or no access to such information or problem solving systems?

The strong impression appears that the food system is not just controlled by, but designed for, the benefit of its highly organised elite and it is their knowledge and technological capabilities that keeps others 'out'. The assumption underpinning this premise is that science allows for innovation and manipulation of ingredients and substitutes, and technology allows for innovative processing so that food can be commodified at a rapid pace. Questions of hygiene and safety are predetermined through quality systems, so that people buying food do not need to discern such features for themselves. People have become so removed from the production of the food item, and the nature of the ingredients being used, that such judgements would not be possible should one wish to make them. This raises concern about the ability of people in the future to recognise food or know of its origins. A recent article in an English newspaper provides an excellent example of this: lovers of oranges may soon be able to eat their favourite fruit without the hassle of peeling it. Researchers in Florida have developed a technique for loosening the skin on oranges so that they can be peeled before

they arrive at the supermarket.... The naked versions have a shelf life of just two weeks, rather than the usual two months. (Coghlan, 1997)

Such a vision of naked oranges sits uncomfortably against questions like: what of the status of people and countries who have been or continue to be, in a position of starvation or poverty rather than greed and plenty? What happens to intuitive understanding about food when decisions are formula based and prescribed, for example, when shelf life of a food item exists on a label, outside of the food and the senses which can assist in judging its freshness?

3. People who purchase and consume food are seen purely as consumers with predictable needs, motivations and behaviour resulting in the belief that systems, which control, manage, anticipate and even manipulate, can be put in place to achieve long-term satisfaction.

By way of illustration of the disregard for individualism and the uniqueness of the people who purchase food and who possess capabilities other than simply consumption, are articles which discuss strategies and plans by the food industry to move their activities into developing countries. The vision portrayed in these writings is characterised by the notion of one moving into these markets and after a period of transition, westernising the local foods and traditions. Such examples include: 'the populations of many countries ... are still lacking the purchasing power to buy more sophisticated and (higher margin) food products and customers [in Asia] stand in awe of the brand' (*The Economist*).

Such a vision disregards the centuries of tradition and custom of the indigenous peoples. What does the vision say or fail to say about markets which are not based on Western values of individualism and consumption, or the nonwestern economist view of market places including such systems as cooperatives, bartering, sharing, etc? How are alternatives accommodated within such a view?

4. Finally, issues such as environmentalism are seen as useful tools available to the food industry to assist it to control and manipulate markets into the future.

The costs incumbent in the food industry's future vision is not included at any level and is, in fact, frequently seen as a factor for considerable exploitation. Profitability is the only measure being used. The total disregard to the impact of this vision on nature, gender, ethnic groups, tradition, class or minority groups, is perhaps the most concerning of all aspects, especially when the impact of such claims as opportunities [to innovate] are growing all the time thanks to the rise of environmentalism exist. In the meantime, the food industry uses the concept of naturalness as a way of ensuring sales. As the food we consume has become more processed it has been presented as more natural by the food industry. (Goodman & Redclift, 1991, 250)

The picture I have painted for you of the future of food is based on an economic and industrial perspective, which is elitist and Western in its attitude. The solutions such a vision proposes for future problems, when clearly analysed, are based only on the ones that caused the problems initially and arise from operations within a closed system. The heavy reliance on one's own internal validating process as outlined above makes one totally unaccountable and this is where my concerns rest.

## **Where are you now?**

Did our generation create a life for you which perpetuates inequalities and is unaccountable, or did we learn from our mistakes and give you a legacy of equal ownership, access to resources and a breaking down of the stereotypical view of the managerial elite to one which includes cultural, gender and age diversity?

How this could have occurred is unclear, as it is evident that the current system has no internal compulsion to change. External agencies, legislative controls or human action will be required at a time closer to my life than yours to influence change which, in turn, will hopefully change this version of the future.

I suppose if I could have my way, I really want us to hit our own metaphorical iceberg making us aware of our own fallibility. It does seem that such a catastrophe will be required to create change, as the vision I have described is one, which seeks to use the same solutions that seem to have created the problem in the first place, but the problems inherent in the vision are not articulated.

I hope my letter has exposed some of these to you. In human terms, the cost of this vision is consistently one based on rationalisation of staff, through redundancies and job losses. No accounting of these costs is included, not even from the perspective of how people of the future will be able to purchase goods if they have little or no income.

I can only live in hope that some kind a rejection will occur which jettisons this vision of a food future which is so devoid of individuality, tradition, nature, difference, uniqueness, creativity and choice and pays no attention to the cost of its actions.

I will write again soon, hopefully on a more cheerful issue.

With all my love,

Your great grandmother,

Mary

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