



The Anglo-French “Beef War” and the Rise of British Euroscepticism

Richard Davis

The outbreak of the neurodegenerative disease, Bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), more commonly known as “mad cow” disease, posed a serious threat to this important sector of the UK agricultural industry and, as it spread, to the rest of Europe and the world. But it was the threat of transmission to humans in the form of variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (vCJD) that produced the gravest fears and which had the greatest impact. The horrific nature of this disease, its origins and its consequences, provided all the necessary ingredients for a full-blown scandal, combining public health scares, significant economic costs and a full-blown crisis in Britain’s relations with its European neighbours and in particular with France.

The infection itself was the result of cattle being fed meat-and-bone meal or scrapie-infected sheep products, essentially ground-up intestines, brains, spinal cords, bones, and other animal parts. For consumers the idea of cows being fed on the remains of other animals rather than peacefully grazing in the open air came as a shock. The measures taken to limit the spread of BSE, including the slaughter of several million cows, only served to exacerbate the popular feeling of dismay and disgust. Images of dying cows suffering from the effects of the disease and then being piled up and incinerated added to the sense of horror, as did reports of carcasses being burnt in power stations to provide energy. Media portrayals of BSE, as a disease that “eats sponge-like holes into the brains of its victims,” were graphic. Moreover, if, or rather when, the disease spread to humans, possibly in large numbers, there would be “no cure” (*New York Times*, 14 June 1996). BSE, however, was not only a question of animal and public health. As the “mad cow” crisis played itself out over the following decade it came to play a major role in British politics, in the politics of the EU and in Britain’s relations with the rest of Europe.

The political crisis, like BSE itself, went through various stages. The first confirmed case of an animal falling ill with the “mad cow” disease came in 1986. The following year laboratory tests confirmed the presence of BSE. In 1989 high-risk foodstuffs such as offal were banned from human consumption. Panic amongst consumers led to a collapse in beef sales, including the leanest cuts deemed by scientists to be safe to eat. By 1990 it was confirmed that BSE had spread to cats. The initial reactions of UK authorities to the crisis were no doubt insufficient and the ban on animal-based feeds, introduced in 1989, was at best “very patchy” (Wall 155). The BSE inquiry, set up by the Blair government in December 1997 and which reported in 2000, criticised the initial inertia of the UK authorities in confronting the crisis, the slowness in recognising its full extent and their lack of openness in the advice given to the public. As the

number of detected cases increased to over 100,000, the UK government introduced a programme of slaughtering entire herds where BSE infection had been found. By the end of the crisis over 4 million cows had been killed. A new level of crisis was reached in 1994 when the first signs of transmission of BSE to humans in the form of vCJD were detected in people who had consumed BSE-infected meat. The fact that this could take several years to become visible raised fears of a public health time-bomb waiting to explode. The first recorded death from vCJD occurred in May 1995. Having initially rejected the causal link between BSE and vCJD, in March 1996 Stephen Dorrell, the Health Secretary, admitted that this was in fact the case. The EU immediately announced that it was imposing a worldwide ban on the export of British beef. It was at this point that a “beef war” broke out, further poisoning Britain’s already tense relations with the EU. Failures to get to the core of the problem in its early stages led to mutual allegations and scapegoating by all those involved, both within the UK and between EU member states. Given the long history of Franco-British rivalry and recriminations it was hardly surprising that the “mad cow” crisis soon became yet another chapter in the long record of confrontation between these two countries.

Food in Anglo-French relations: identities, differences and denigration

Food has undoubtedly played an important role in the construction of national identities. It is also a means of identifying and labelling other nationalities, something that is often spiced up with the added ingredients of national chauvinism and mutual denigration. Nowhere is this more evident than in the relations between Britain and France. The British look across at the “frogs” on the other side of the Channel and the French look back at the “*rosbifs*.” Food has been an important factor in how they view each other, feeding into the deeply entrenched stereotypes they have of one another and of themselves. France’s sense of its own culinary superiority could be applied to comparisons with any country but it is Britain and British cooking that is the most frequent target of French humour, often of French pity. Jacques Chirac’s widely reported remark that you “can’t trust people (the British) who cook as badly as that” (*The Daily Telegraph*, 4 July 2005; Blair 562-63) sums up a widely-held French opinion. Even in our languages the sense of French superiority comes through: where the English language has adopted “restaurant,” “chef,” “sommelier,” even “cuisine” and “bon appétit,” in return French has taken “le fast food” and “le binge drinking.” Such condescending views of British culinary efforts in turn feed into the British image of the French as unbearably arrogant, snobbish and conceited. Although the British media delights in the occasional reports of the superiority of British cooking, it is difficult for anyone in the UK to claim that they would consistently come out on top in any culinary comparison with France. This has not, however, stopped many people in Britain feeling a certain suspicion, often a visceral dislike, of French

food (Mennell 3). For many French observers, British cuisine is something of a contradiction in terms, corresponding to the grey British weather and the supposedly puritanical traits of the British character and lifestyle. No matter how out of date they may have become over recent years these images remain firmly in place.

Beyond its significance for British and French national identities, food and its production are also of great economic and commercial importance. This in turn has given food great social and political significance. In these areas, like so many others, Britain and France have taken divergent paths and adopted different attitudes. In its attachment to its “*terroirs*,” in its attitudes to food supply and to food in general, France is quite distinct from its northern neighbour; Britain, as the first great industrial and urbanised nation, has a distinctly different history. The two sides in this “beef war,” therefore, came to it from quite distinct perspectives, histories, and traditions, including different approaches to agriculture. The comparative strength of the French farming lobby compared to the indifference to the farming sector felt by many people in the UK has also differentiated the two countries. Given these fundamental dissimilarities in British and French attitudes it is hardly surprising that they have frequently been at loggerheads when it comes to question of agricultural policy.

Britain and France may not have resorted to arms in the “beef war” but they have often adopted a belligerent rhetoric. The violent actions of French farmers, sometimes against British exporters and widely reported in the British media, often amaze and infuriate British observers. Of course, the disagreements between London and Paris have included other, far more serious, issues. Most recently over the war in Iraq. Nonetheless, in terms of the damage done to Anglo-French relations the so-called “beef war” was significant. It should also be placed in the context of an on-going series of other food “wars.” In 1984, when French farmers blocked British lamb exports, the *Sun* headline ran “L’Ambush. French grab our lorries and steal our meat” (*Sun*, 12 January 1984). In 1990, British opinion was further enraged when French farmers again blocked British lamb exports, burning both the lorries and the lambs inside. This was seized upon by the Francophobe British tabloids and led to an emergency debate in the House of Commons. In 1994, a new maritime front was added with an Anglo-French “fish war” with French fishermen “on the rampage... destroying wholesale fish supplies... sacking a supermarket” and blockading Channel ports (*Daily Telegraph*, 4 February 1994). More recently we have seen “scallop wars” in 2012 and 2018 as British and French fishermen confront one another in the Channel over access to fishing waters. This last issue was prominent in the pro-Brexit campaign in 2016 and remains one of the major sticking points in the current UK-EU trade negotiations. On a more anecdotal level, de Gaulle complained in 1961 that the French were drinking far too much Scottish whisky, arguing that they should

drink Cognac instead. Scottish whisky, he claimed, was just a “*vulgaire eau-de-vie*” (Peyrefitte 75).

Given the strength of the lobbies in both countries, fishing will always be a serious bone of contention between Britain and France. The issue of beef, however, seems to have touched an even more sensitive nerve. The iconic importance of the “roast beef of old England” can be traced back to the 18th century when, in literature, theatre and in the graphic arts, beef assumed a significant role in the popular imagery of Britishness, becoming part of the British gastronomic chauvinism that praised honest British food compared to the more meagre fare enjoyed elsewhere. Hogarth’s well-known 1748 painting “O the Roast Beef of Old England (The Gate of Calais)”¹ has at its heart a side of British beef destined for the British Inn, while the scrawny French characters watch on enviously. At the height of the “beef war” John Major’s defence of British beef had similarly patriotic tones. For Hugo Young,

The beef row somehow excited the famous viscera to more turbulent agitation than ever. Was this because the substance at issue was the Roast Beef of Old England, the complete culinary symbol of British eating? Major himself called beef “part of the psyche of our nation,” to be reckoned alongside forests for the Germans. Might poisoned lamb, or contaminated chicken, have touched a less sensitive national nerve? (Young 463)

Anglo-French differences over food and agriculture were also the result of more recent disagreements over the nature of the EU and its agricultural policy. These can be traced back to the early years of European construction following the signature of the Treaty of Rome in 1957 and the agreement reached by the EEC to establish a Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). By guaranteeing prices for European farmers, subsidising European agricultural exports and establishing tariffs on imports from outside the Community, the CAP was clearly designed by the French to defend their own agricultural interests. For the British this smacked of autarky, something that went against their own free trade approach and their policy of buying food from around the world, especially from the Commonwealth, at the cheapest possible price. The fact that the UK was absent from these negotiations was to have major consequences for its later relationships with the other Europeans. By the time the UK entered the EEC in 1973, the CAP was firmly in place.

For generations of British leaders, of all political persuasions, the CAP embodied everything that was least acceptable about the EEC/EU, that which they found hardest to swallow. It included all the contentious issues and disagreements that prevented Britain from comfortably assuming its position in Europe. Firstly, given that the CAP accounted for two-thirds of the EEC/EU budget at one point, it was seen as the source of the financial burden that came with

¹ <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/hogarth-o-the-roast-beef-of-old-england-the-gate-of-calais-no1464>. Accessed July 15th 2020.

membership of the EEC/EU. Over many years, successive European summits regularly boiled down to a clash between those member states seeking to maintain a high level of agricultural spending, and who were its main beneficiaries, and those whose agricultural sectors were relatively less important, whose farming lobbies had less political weight, and who wished to reduce this budget. Inevitably these battles over the CAP and the budget saw the UK and France lined up at the head of the two opposing camps. Added to this, most people in Britain regarded the CAP as propping up inefficient European, especially French, farmers, as an obstacle to the developing world by blocking access to the European market, and as harmful to the environment. Seen from France, the CAP has also been strongly criticised but for a quite different reason: that it does too little to help poor French farmers.

From scientific analysis to political passions: The Euro-sceptics' beef with Europe

Issues relating to food, and more widely to agriculture, are always highly sensitive. The BSE crisis and the ensuing “beef war” were to heighten the emotions felt on all sides to almost unprecedented levels. Indeed, the crises, and the political reactions to them, were influenced as much by passions as they were by hard facts or scientific and medical opinion. The horrors of BSE and the deeply felt fears of its possible consequences for human health frequently meant that decision-making was conducted in a heated atmosphere that undermined efforts to provide rational analyses and solutions. These were also issues that were addressed as much in the public arena as in the corridors of power or the laboratory. The pressure exerted by public opinion, often extremely fervently, played an important role. Parts of the media, usually with their own political agenda, deliberately sought to fan the flames of an already impassioned debate. Coming on top of the deeply embedded, almost atavistic, inclination in Anglo-European and Anglo-French relations to adopt a confrontational posture, all these factors produced a toxic mix that did little to help achieve a peaceful and successful outcome to the crisis. Stephen Wall, who as the UK’s Permanent Representative to the EU at the height of the “beef war” from 1995 to 2000 had to deal with much of its diplomatic fallout, summed up the atmosphere in which the crisis occurred. It was, he wrote, “an issue where fear skewed objective judgement on both (British and European) sides” (Wall 154-55). Jean Glavany, the French Agricultural Minister from 1998 until 2002, similarly highlights the “irrationality” that reigned at the time. “*Dans cette terrible crise,*” he writes, “*la confusion la plus totale avait envahi les idées et les connaissances*” (Glavany 108).

John Major was “incensed” and “affronted” (Major 651-52) by the EU decision to ban the export of British beef in 1996, accusing the Commission and other European leaders of being “hysterical” (Major 651). In return his adversaries at home and on the Continent accused him of deliberately aggravating the conflict by adopting an aggressive patriotic posture in an

attempt to placate the Euro-sceptics in his party who were accusing the EU of a “blatant piece of political and commercial discrimination” (Wall 155). At no time did the Major government show empathy for the justifiable fears about BSE in other European countries or sympathy with their EU counterparts who were having to face their own electorates’ concerns. The political and public health scandals over contaminated blood supplies a few years before, especially significant in understanding French reactions, were undoubtedly significant factors. For Hugo Young by “stamping his foot in rage at what he regarded as the unscientific politicking of the continentals” (Young 462), the British Prime Minister only further envenomed British relations with the rest of Europe and did nothing to heal divisions over Europe within his party.

In many ways it was precisely these concerns for the unity of the Conservative Party and the need to keep its most virulent Eurosceptic factions in check that were the overriding concern of John Major in his dealings with the EU over the BSE crisis. Like many British Prime Ministers before and after him, his fall-back position was to assume an anti-European posture, posing as the defender of Britain against the threat looming on the continental horizon. The so-called “beef war” between Britain and France must therefore be placed in the context of a rising tide of Euroscepticism in the UK, most notably in the Conservative Party. As the Anglo-French battles over beef unfolded, with their “victories” and “defeats,” their “advances,” “standoffs” and “retreats,” they need to be seen as part of a wider clash between the UK and its EU “partners.” To talk of “conflict” or “war” to describe the overall UK-EU relationship would be to employ overly strong terms. Nonetheless, the recourse to a martial lexicography was almost universal when it came to the “beef war.” It also needs to be borne in mind that just as Eurosceptic sentiment was gaining ground in the UK key political leaders on the Continent were pushing ahead with projects to further extend and deepen European integration, most notably the creation of a common European currency.

John Major’s “beef war” was fought on two fronts simultaneously, at home and in Europe. In many ways the precariousness of his position in both explains the aggressive nature of his reactions. With his leadership openly defied by several key members of his own Party, and even by some in his government, and with a slender and dwindling majority in Parliament, he had little room for manoeuvre when the “sullen dissent” in the Conservative Party “flared into open conflict in the crisis over BSE” (Wall 154). At the outbreak of the BSE crisis, Major was well aware that the farming sector was a traditional bulwark of the Conservative Party. Alienating it by appearing as anything less than a stalwart defender of its interests in Europe would only further encourage rebellious tendencies among his backbenchers. Major knew very well the seriousness of his position vis-à-vis his Party where the Euro-sceptics were asking “should not Britain flex its muscles and respond (to the EU ban)? Was it not limp-wristed of the British

government to try to negotiate its way out of the problem?” (Major 653). On the other hand, he had come into office in 1990 promising to put Britain at the “heart of Europe,” even if he is also remembered for his outburst against the French a few years later when they were digging in their heels during GATT negotiations over agricultural protectionism. “Get your tractors off our lawn,” he proclaimed to a rapturous Conservative Party conference in 1993.

Whatever ambitions that John Major may have had to place his country’s relations with the rest of Europe on a more positive footing were seriously set back by the onset of the BSE crisis. The possibility that “even the UK’s commitment to EU membership was in doubt” (Wall 154-55) was now being raised in London and in Brussels. This was not what John Major sought but the intermingling of the BSE crisis and the confrontation with the EU developed in ways that were to spin out of his control. Nor did his management of these parallel public health and international crises help to reach a resolution of either. For Hugo Young the decision to neither advise nor consult the EU Commission at the outset of the crisis “showed some contempt for the body which, after all, would have decisive influence on the regulatory consequences, and represented millions of European nationals whose health was potentially under threat from British negligence.” The result was a “a long-drawn-out absence of mutual co-operation, which in turn did much to transmute the scepticism of many of the island Tory politicians into downright phobia for the continent and all who made decisions there” (Young 461). Stephen Wall similarly argues that the European Commission “had been inadequately informed of developments at the outset” and that the Euro-sceptics in the Conservative Party saw the EU ban “as an opportunity to declare war on Brussels” (Wall 154). As a result, “the government was driven to decisions by anti-European sentiment within its own Party [...] the temptation [...] to blame ‘Europe’ for reacting against a problem of our own making was irresistible” (Wall 213).

In all these ways the issues of food, farming and public health spilled across all areas of domestic British politics and then into Europe and beyond. It seriously poisoned Britain’s relations with the rest of the EU and with France in particular. In numerous ways BSE and the ensuing “beef war” in Europe fed into and reinforced British Euroscepticism. It was used, very effectively, by Euro-sceptics in their increasingly aggressive campaign. Across the Channel it hardened the already widely held feelings that Britain was not truly European and that it was not truly committed to its position as a member of the EU.

Opening salvos in the BSE conflict

Following the EU’s imposition of the beef ban, relations with London quickly deteriorated. Angry at the ban itself, and frustrated by the refusal of the EU member states to accept what

they believed to be the scientific evidence that British beef, or at least the prime cuts, was safe, the UK government quickly adopted a warlike posture towards its EU partners. Various forms of retaliation were considered including a possible ban on EU meat products in the UK. Eventually John Major adopted an “empty chair policy” in Brussels, following the example set by de Gaulle in the 1960s when he withdrew all French representatives from Brussels thus blocking decisions that required a unanimous vote. The announcement of this policy in the Commons was “greeted with rapture by many on the Conservative benches.” The Euro-sceptic press saw it “as a declaration of war on Europe” (Major 654). If, however, de Gaulle’s actions had achieved their aim of blocking European institutions and forcing the others to backtrack, Major’s policy was far less effective. What it did result in was a further degradation in relations with the other Europeans whose view of Major became increasingly poor. For Denis MacShane, Major’s attempt to browbeat the other Europeans “produced no more than a puzzled shrug of the shoulders [...] the rest of Europe just assumed that Mr Major had been eating too much raw steak and had gone a little mad” (MacShane 82-83). Others saw this as British blackmail. It did nothing to convince the other Europeans to lift the beef ban. It soon became clear that in following this policy Britain was shooting itself in the foot, blocking numerous measures on the EU agenda that the UK itself had been promoting. On the domestic front, rather than placating Eurosceptic feelings it only invigorated them.

An increasing number of voices in the UK Parliament, even from those outside the hard-core of Eurosceptic die-hards, were now seeking to blame the other Europeans. Although numerous countries around the world, including the USA and many in the Commonwealth, imposed equally severe measures on British beef exports and maintained a ban for far longer than the EU they were rarely the target of British complaints or hostility. China did not lift its ban on British beef exports until 2018; Japan only in 2019. The BSE “blame game” was played almost exclusively against the EU, above all between Britain and France. As Jean Glavany noted, there was no equivalent reaction in the UK to the “tide of anti-French feeling” (Vion 275). Germany, for example, which imposed a similar ban to the one in France, was never targeted in the same way. Once set in motion, this Anglo-French “blame game” was conducted with ever greater enthusiasm on both sides.

One frequent reproach made by British Euro-sceptics was that the other Europeans were hiding the extent to which they, too, were suffering from BSE. As reported in the House of Commons *Hansard*, The Conservative MP Paul Marland, for example, claimed on 13 November 1996 that other European countries, unlike the UK, had no system for tracing BSE. He was more specific about France where, he argued, “All too often, when a cow [...] looks as if it has a BSE problem, it is diagnosed by the vet as having backache. The farmer is advised to get it to the market and into the food chain as quickly as possible, so that the whole affair can

be covered up”. In the same debate another Conservative MP, Jim Spicer, feared that even if the ban were lifted the other EU countries would “continue to ban our beef products, by hook or by crook?” He continued his speech in the best martial spirit, returning to the previous “lamb war” when he had travelled to Normandy:

When I marched off a lorry containing sheep that had entered a French port, it was almost like landing on D-day. The port was deserted and we were cowering and cringing like the lead man in a fighting patrol, waiting for the French farmers to attack us, and I can promise that there were no police about.

He was not, however, about to give up and in the best “Dunkirk spirit” he still believed that if needs be the country could “endure five years as a fortress” and that British agriculture would “emerge from this total ban in good shape and ready to fight”. Other Eurosceptic Conservative MPs, like Marland and Spicer from largely rural constituencies, expressed similar sentiments. For Hector Monro, the other Europeans were unlikely to ever accept a lifting of the ban no matter what measures the UK introduced. They were, he argued, “not considering the matter scientifically. Sadly, they have a totally irrational attitude, with their own home beef production at the forefront of their minds”. John Townend went further arguing that “this country has been double-crossed by our European partners in respect of the lifting of the beef ban [...] they are enjoying taking British export markets and they have no intention of lifting the ban for several years” (*Hansard*, 13 November 1996). By the time John Major fell from power in the 1997 elections, no real progress had been made towards lifting the beef ban. Tony Blair came into office with the BSE crisis still very much unresolved and the EU beef ban still firmly in place.

It has always been the case that Britain’s often difficult relations with the rest of Europe have been conducted in the full glare of a media coverage that is for the most part hostile to the idea of British participation in European integration and which has often veered into overt xenophobia. For the most Eurosceptic elements of the British media, notably tabloids such as the *Sun*, the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Express*, the confrontation with the EU over British beef was a welcome opportunity to promote their anti-European campaign. The controversial and sensitive nature of all the questions raised by BSE, against the background of an increasingly intense European debate in the UK, provided these publications with a field day which they fully exploited. Their coverage deliberately nourished the fears and phobias of large parts of the UK population with regard to both BSE/vCJD and Europe. The *Sun* led the way. In March 1996 it proclaimed that “If Brussels has the power to stop Britain from selling a product anywhere in the world, then we are no longer an independent sovereign nation with control over our own affairs [...]. We are just one of the herd. John Bull has been neutered.” It continued in the same vein on 28 October 1999 when it published a special French version with

the headline “*Nous ne voulons pas la GUERRE mais la France a tort.*” As Hugo Young put it, BSE had “unleashed the media dogs, barking at Major with renewed ferocity” (Young 463). The same problems now confronted Tony Blair. His media advisor, Alistair Campbell, noted in November 1999 that “Beef was becoming a real disaster area in the media” (Campbell 427).

The Anglo-French beef war declared

Although the initial issue had been one between the UK and the EU as a whole, British criticism, as has so often been the case in recent confrontations with Europe, more often than not singled out France as the principal opposition. In 1999 what had started out as a disagreement between the UK and the EU Commission now became a more virulent Anglo-French conflict. Tony Blair had come into office promising a far more positive approach to Europe and he clearly had ambitions to repair the damage done by John Major and Margaret Thatcher to Britain’s reputation on the Continent. The “beef war” was a serious obstacle to this. Blair himself seems to have tried as far as possible to keep away from this issue, leaving it to other members of his government. No mention is made of it in his memoirs. Nonetheless the BSE crisis could hardly be avoided while the “beef war” inevitably opened up the government to the Euro-sceptics’ accusations that they were unwilling to defend British interests in Europe. It also made his attempts to achieve some sort of rapprochement with the EU and with France all the more difficult.

In July 1999, more than three years after the imposition of the EU ban, the European Commission announced that exports of British beef could start again from the beginning of August. A few days later, however, France and Germany announced that they would not be lifting the ban immediately and that they needed further health checks before exports would be allowed. Nick Brown, the Agriculture Minister, angrily condemned the French decision as contrary to EU law. He was soon backed up by the Irish EU Consumer Protection Commissioner, David Byrne. In the UK, calls were made to boycott French food and some supermarkets began to remove French produce from their shelves. The situation was further envenomed later in the same month when reports came out that French farmers had been feeding their livestock with processed human and animal sewage! Inevitably the British press took this up with glee, reigniting all the previous accusations of French hypocrisy. *Private Eye* had the headline “Beef war—French rumbled” above a photo of Tony Blair saying to Jacques Chirac “We know what you’re feeding your cattle” and the French President replying “Merde!” Even the normally pro-European *Guardian* could not resist the opportunity to mock the French, especially on a subject so dear to their hearts as food. Its columnist Charlotte Raven wrote in October 1999: “Now, our Daisy may have had a few problems forgetting people’s

names, mistaking herself for a chicken, that kind of thing, but she never stooped to eating human faeces.” In this atmosphere of accusation and counter accusation talks between Britain, France and the EU to settle the dispute made no headway.

After these first skirmishes the British felt they had won a first victory at the end of October when the EU’s Scientific Steering Committee gave its verdict that there was no justification for the French ban. The next day the *Times* announced: “French routed in beef battle.” Its claim that Britain had “won a huge and comprehensive victory,” however, was not confirmed by later developments. On November 3 the *Guardian* headline read: “British retreat in beef battle.” Faced with the French decision, the Blair government took a restrained approach agreeing on November 2 to consider EU demands for further safety measures, thus pushing back any final decision to lift the export ban. The Conservative Opposition and large parts of the press seized on this to launch a virulent attack on the government. In the House of Commons, the Conservative leader, William Hague, accused the government of having had their “spines taken out,” just like “dead cows”. Others pointed to the weakness of the EU. The accusation that France was in effect above EU regulations and that it could choose to flaunt EU rulings, moreover without fear of punishment, was to become a recurrent theme in Britain. Although EU legal proceedings against Paris were begun in mid-November for breaching EU rules, in December the French government, acting on the advice of its Food Safety Agency, announced that the ban would stay in force. The French held onto their ban on British beef until 2006. No fines were ever paid.

Seen from France, the issue was one of public health and of following the precautionary principle that food should be always be proven to be safe (Glavany 108). The French were also no less inclined to indulge in the “blame game” than the British. In the same way as the British, there was a good deal of French resentment at how the UK authorities had behaved and how they were attempting to use the French as scapegoats to cover their own failures. One particular complaint was that the British had discretely continued to sell infected animal-based feed on the French market long after its consumption in the UK had been banned (Glavany 153-54). There was also talk in France of possible legal claims being made against the UK by French victims of vCJD. There were several criticisms of the UK from the left in France on ideological grounds: that the whole affair was the result of the “deregulatory, anti-inspection prejudices of high Thatcherism” (Young 460). For Glavany, responsibility should be placed at the door of the “Thatcher years,” with its “unbridled liberalism” and attacks on the public sector, including the UK’s veterinary services. According to Glavany, the failure was Britain’s but it was the “whole of Europe that paid the price” (Glavany 144).

At the same time, and for so long as the French held their ground over the beef ban, British complaints against France continued unabated throughout the following years. Again, the

British press made the most of all these opportunities to pursue its “frog bashing,” targeting France with a series of accusations: that in fact France had more cases of BSE than the UK, that a great many French cases of BSE had gone undetected and that France’s own “mad cow” crisis had been deliberately hidden from the public. French accounts presented a different picture: above all that the response of the French government was motivated exclusively by concerns for public health (Glavany 108) and not with the aim of defending French commercial or farming interests as many in Britain claimed. The statistics backing up these contrasting interpretations differed significantly. According to Glavany, writing in 2001, there had been 180,000 cases of BSE in the UK and “around 350” over the previous ten years in France, that is to say “500 times fewer!” (Glavany 113). Accusations from the UK that the French had deliberately sought to avoid testing cows in order to mask the true extent of the BSE crisis in their country were refuted: the testing programme put in place from August 2000 onwards was, according to Glavany, the “earliest and the most ambitious ever set up in the world” (Glavany 115). In conclusion, France was “undoubtedly the European country which had, for many years, taken the greatest precautions” with regard to BSE while other countries—Glavany cites Germany, Spain, Italy and Greece—had neither looked to find cases of BSE in their herds nor insisted on the removal from animal feed of the most at-risk animal parts in the brains and spinal columns (Glavany 121). The greatest blame, however, was reserved for the UK government which, again according to Glavany, had “deliberately lied to its public over many years” (Glavany 122). Equally, when the foot and mouth crisis broke out in Britain in 2001 and quickly spread to the rest of Europe, this was “yet another crisis imported from the UK! [...] further proof of the deficiencies existing across the Channel” (Glavany 143-44).

On both sides of this “beef war” journalists, cartoonists and politicians constantly fell back on references to past conflicts between the two countries presenting it as just the latest in a long list of other wars going back centuries. Heroes and villains from the past, from Joan of Arc to de Gaulle, were drawn as comparisons to enlighten this latest clash. Tony Blair was even portrayed by the French journalist Pascal Aubert, writing in *La Tribune*, as (beef?) Wellington, inflicting a “bovine version” of Waterloo on France. The same article had the French Prime Minister, Lionel Jospin, in the less flattering role of Cambronne. Memories of Agincourt, Fontenoy, Trafalgar and Fashoda were revived alongside Waterloo (Vion 276). Seen in this light, the latest disagreement between Britain and France was just the latest episode in a long-running saga of war. Naturally, most French media reports were far less inclined than Aubert to see things from such a British point of view, although their coverage of events rarely, if ever, reached the same depths of xenophobia as some of their British counterparts. Nor were all British accounts unsympathetic to the French case. Edward Heath was a rare example in Conservative ranks in expressing his understanding of the French measures. Similar expressions from the Labour benches were rather more numerous. As Alex Salmond pointed

out, had the positions been reversed, with the French announcing that they had a serious disease in its food supply chain that posed a risk to public health, it was highly probable that those Euro-sceptics who were most vociferous in their attacks on France would have been the first to demand that the Channel ports be blockaded against French imports.

Conclusion: From “beef war” to Brexit

Instead of considering these events in the form of a balance sheet of winners and losers, a zero-sum approach typical of Anglo-French relations, it would perhaps be more appropriate to conclude that in this “beef war,” as in many others, there could be no winners. Certainly neither Britain nor France can be said to have emerged entirely victorious and none of the various governments that had to deal with this crisis come out of it well. The EU was definitely damaged and its credibility undermined. With hindsight the failures of the Major government are clear. Tony Blair’s attitude seems to have been to play down the crisis and wait for it to blow over. In France successive governments were above all keen to avoid being accused of another public health scandal similar to the infected blood that had badly damaged their predecessors. It is understandable that they should have placed the principle of precaution at the heart of their policy. There remain doubts as to the sincerity of this approach and the motivations that underlay it. Can there ever be absolute certainty that any food supply will always be 100% sure? If not, then was France justified in maintaining its ban on British beef despite strong scientific evidence that it was no more dangerous than beef from other European countries, including France? Was French policy more “theatrical” than “scientific” as some have claimed? (Godard 183).

It is sometimes claimed that food and drink are useful tools in the conduct of international diplomacy, oiling its wheels and easing tensions. The clashes between Britain and France that resulted from the BSE crisis show that this is not always the case. BSE proved to be toxic not just for animal health, and for public health, but also for the state of Britain’s relations with its neighbours. The resentment and rancour that resulted from this “beef war” took some time to dissipate and memories linger still today. British beef, and possibly through it Britain as a whole, still retains a negative image in France. As a result of the “beef war,” Eurosceptic views of French high-handedness and intransigence, alongside similar views of EU inefficiency and unfairness towards the UK, were added to an already long list of British grievances. In this way BSE and the “beef war” can be seen today as a significant episode on the increasingly Eurosceptic path that led finally to the 2016 Brexit referendum.

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