

Q&A with Professor Tim Lang

“Food has barely featured in Brexit discussions”



Tim Lang, Professor of Food Policy, City, University of London

New Food interviewed Professor Tim Lang, Professor of Food Policy at City University London, ahead of its Food Brexit 2018 Conference. Professor Lang discusses the implications of Brexit on the food industry and gives his opinion on the future of food for the UK.

New Food: How could Brexit impact food security for the UK?

Tim: It's uncertain, and could go in multiple directions, but the capacity for disruption to a just-in-time food system is considerable and recognised throughout the industry. This is not helped by fog from DEFRA with regard to food planning. Indeed, it looks as though DEFRA is reverting to a Ministry of Agriculture & Fish (MAF, a predecessor that went in 1955).

New Food: What more should MPs and the wider industry be doing to prepare for life outside the EU (if that happens)?

Tim: The priority is to push not just the English Cabinet but leaders of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to face food. Food has barely featured in Brexit discussions so far. This is remiss, indeed astonishing.

New Food: Earlier this year, United States Under Secretary of Agriculture for Trade and Foreign Agricultural Affairs, Ted McKinney, rather passionately refuted the notion that chlorine-washing chicken is a common practice. His office had set up a Google alert to be triggered if Michael Gove or DEFRA mentioned food safety and trade in the same context. There seems to be a question not simply over whether the practice is safe but whether it takes place at all. What would you have liked to say to Mr McKinney on the subject, given your stance?

Tim: Either he doesn't know what he's talking about, doesn't read his own Government's documents, or doesn't understand public health. Certainly, hawks in the US food system have long wanted to dismantle the EU's approach to chemicals, risks, health protection and food standards. They cannot bully the EU – one of the only global bodies that can stand up to USDA and the US Department of Commerce – so the UK leaving the EU is an opportunity to get into another market. Hence statements from Wilbur Ross, US Secretary for Commerce, making it clear he/they will not accept EU-type standards. Hence the delicacy of matters such as how, when and why poultry are made 'safe' for sale.

New Food: Whilst all eyes have been on the U.S., similar controversy has brewed over an Australian trade deal and finally boiled over into headlines. It seems possible, even likely, that the ban on hormone-fed beef will be lifted in accordance with pressure from the potential partner. What effect do you anticipate this would have on the beef market in the UK?

Tim: Uncertain. I heard Australia's Trade Minister give a speech on March 26 when he was over in London in which he said that the UK should not expect to be fed by Australia, but the UK food industry is welcome to use Australia as a gateway into its modern market, i.e. Asia.

New Food: In an article you wrote in The Guardian less than a week after the referendum, you started by saying that "food barely featured in the referendum". Two years on, give or take, do you feel that Britain's food security has moved more into the public-political consciousness or does it remain a dangerously fringe issue? I would also ask if there has been progress towards anything that resembles the people's food plan you referred to in your conclusion?

Tim: Little has fundamentally changed. That said, there have been welcome statements (in two HMG docs; A Greener Future and Harmony and Health) from DEFRA, but these actually focus on environmental issues on or near the land – they focus on farming not food. This deficit is worrying, indeed stupid, given the UK intends to leave the EU from March 29, 2019 yet gets a third of its food from EU members!

There is an ongoing fight within the Tory Party (and to a lesser but important extent a parallel one in Labour) over different visions for the future of the food system. I am writing about this at present (more will be known by Food Brexit 2018) as a choice of visions: Atlanticists vs neo-colonial (e.g. Commonwealth as Empire 2.0) vs arms-length European vs globalist vs little England vs bioregionalist vs green landscape.

It's too early to see which vision will triumph or if there will be a crossover. I suspect the latter, with strong forces for green farming plus cheaper food from abroad. These represent battles over what land is for, food security, price and affordability; i.e. whether a harder version of cheap food policy triumphs alongside other interests.



Charli Janeway,
Content Producer, *New Food*

We are delighted to welcome Professor Tim Lang as a speaker at Food Brexit 2018. Tim will be presenting in the food security session. For more information about the conference and to book your place, please [click here](#).

The interview was conducted by New Food's Content Producer Charli Janeway. For more information about the Food Brexit programme and to discover speaking opportunities, please email Charli at cjaneway@russellpublishing.com