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FROM POLICY COMMUNITY  
TO ISSUE NETWORK:  
SALMONELLA IN EGGS AND  
THE NEW POLITICS OF FOOD

MARTIN J. SMITH



**Brunel**   
THE UNIVERSITY OF WEST LONDON

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Martin J. Smith

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Martin J. Smith  
Department of Government  
Brunel University  
Uxbridge  
UB8 3PH



Martin J. Smith

*From Policy Community to Issue Network: Salmonella in Eggs and the New  
Politics of Food*

In the last two years food and, in particular, the production and quality of food has become a political issue. This is an important change. Since the 1950s food policy has been subject to little political debate. Britain's food policy has been constrained by a consensus which limits the role of government to facilitating the best quality and choice of food at a reasonable price. This has been ensured through agricultural policy, a limited nutritional policy (Mills 1991) and legislation dealing with the handling and storage of food. However, most of these issues were seen as technical matters and discussion on food policy and the views of the consumers were largely excluded from the political agenda.

The paper will use the concept of policy networks to explain the way in which food became a political issue. Policy networks are a means of categorising the relationship between groups and the government/government department. These range from policy communities to issue networks. In the former there is a limited number of participants who share values on policy outcomes with a limited number of decision-making centres and decisions are made with the exclusion of the public and of parliament (Rhodes 1988). In the latter there is a wide range of actors moving in and out of the policy arenas with different views of policy outcomes and a wide range of decision-making centres (Hecl 1978). If a policy community exists it is possible to depoliticise a policy arena by excluding groups from the policy

making process who are likely to disagree with the established policy agenda. With an issue network, policy-making is more likely to be pluralistic with many groups in conflict over the policy outcomes in addition to conflict between the various decision-making centres.

This paper will show how after the second world war the issue of food was depoliticised and a policy community was established which excluded consumers. It will then examine the impact of the salmonella in eggs affair, in order to demonstrate the way in which the food policy network has changed in recent years. Finally it will discuss the long-term impact of the salmonella affair on the political salience of food.

#### THE SECOND WORLD WAR AND THE DEPOLITISATION OF FOOD.

During the second world war the need to ensure adequate supplies of food and a nutritional diet meant that food became political and through the establishment of a Ministry of Food consumers were given some influence on food policy. The Ministry of Food was created in wartime in order to ensure that people were provided with 'the utmost supplies possible of food for direct human consumption...' (Hammond 1951, pp. 79-80). This led to conflicts with the Ministry of Agriculture which was concerned with ensuring prices and patterns of production which suited farmers. The Ministry of Agriculture wanted to increase prices and maintain livestock production whereas the Ministry of Food wanted to limit price increases and push farmers into increasing production of cereals and potatoes (CAB 71 1). The Cabinet rejected the Ministry of Agriculture's views and supported the restructuring of prices in order to encourage the production of food for direct human consumption.

Consumer interests also appeared to have an impact on the issue of nutrition. The Government had to ensure that the population received a nutritional diet despite the reduction in food available. Therefore food production policy became much more concerned with the nutritional aspects of diet. The *laissez-faire* approach of the pre-war years was replaced by what Hammond (1951, p. 218) refers to as a 'revolution in the attitude of the British state to towards the feeding of its citizens.' The Government scientifically determined the best diet available in the circumstances and recognised its role in ensuring that the public obtained this food.

This change in view was not only accepted as a result of wartime necessity but as the basis of post-war policy. At the Hot Springs Conference of 1944 the British Government agreed with other Governments that a permanent organisation for food and agriculture should be set up. They also acknowledged that Governments should undertake to try to improve the diet and food resources and initiate national nutritional organisations (Hammond 1951, p.360). The Government accepted that long-term policy should derive from the principles that the natural and economic advantages of the country determines the farming system adopted. On this basis nutritional food should be produced, the farming system should maintain soil fertility and there should be protection from erosion (MAF 53/171). The Government recognised that because it has a role in ensuring a nutritious diet, the structure of agriculture should be economic and so a return to the mixed farming pattern of the 1930s was desirable.

The second world war had a number of important implications for the issue of food. First, during the war food was a political issue. There was conflict over what food should be produced, the price of food and the nutritional requirements of the populations. Secondly, food policy was not



subsumed within a closed agricultural policy community. The policy community was relatively open. It included both the Ministries of Food and Agriculture and the Treasury with the Lord President's Committee, a Cabinet Committee, arbitrating between the various claims and providing the final decision-making institution. So despite the fact that the relationship between the farmers and the Ministry of Agriculture became much closer with the increased importance of the farmers (Smith 1990), the consumers interest was still represented by the Ministry of Food and apparently had some impact on policy.

However, when the war ended this commitment to a food policy and the consumer interests gradually faded as agricultural interests came to dominate food policy. Food policy became part of a depoliticised and closed agricultural policy community. Why and how did this happen? The concerns with a balanced agriculture and nutritional food policy were initially removed from the agenda by the economic crisis of the immediate post-war years. At the end of the war the food situation became worse as there was a general world food shortage and Britain was faced with a severe dollar shortage which limited its ability to pay for imports. This greatly increased the economic importance of the farmers especially when the Government announced a £100 million expansion programme aimed at rapidly increasing food production.

The financial situation was so serious that the Treasury was prepared to support and finance a programme of 'all out production' through substantially higher prices to farmers (CAB 127/572). All other aspects of food policy were downgraded in order to achieve an increased production of food almost at any cost. This had the secondary consequence of further institutionalising the relationship between the MAF and the NFU. The NFU

was guaranteed a role in the agricultural policy-making process but no provision was made for the inclusion of consumer interests. There was a general consensus underpinned by the crises that agricultural production had to be increased. It was assumed that because everyone accepted this policy there was no need to include non-farm interests in policy-making. The view within government was that the consumer would be represented by other Departments. However, no other Departments dissented from the production programme even though this meant the end of the Government's goal of returning to a balanced and economic agriculture. After the war all objectives bar increasing production were neglected.

An ideology of expansionism became accepted within the Ministry of Agriculture and the Government as a whole. Food was depoliticised because there was a consensus on agricultural expansion. Any group or individual which challenged this consensus was viewed as extreme and so was excluded from the policy community. As a result there was no distinct consumer interest. In effect food policy became providing food without concern to cost, quality and nutrition. The first indication in the declining importance of food policy and consumer interests came with the amalgamation of the Ministry of Food into the Ministry of Agriculture.

Whilst the Ministry of Food existed the consumer did have an institutionalised voice in government, and in the post-war era the Ministry of Food had attempted to protect the interests of consumers in the annual determination of farm prices. For a short while after the war food remained political with conflicts over food prices and the continuation of rationing maintaining the salience of food issues. However, the conflicts between the Ministries of Agriculture and Food moved the NFU to suggest that the amalgamation of the Ministry of Food with the Ministry of

Agriculture was 'urgently needed' (*The Times* 17 January 1950). Officials at the Ministry of Food feared that if the Ministry was amalgamated with Agriculture:

Such a Ministry would be subjected to heavy pressure from the National Farmers' Union at Ministerial level (and) it would rapidly degenerate into the kind of department that the Ministry of Agriculture is today, i.e. primarily concerned with looking after the farmers' interests (MAF 127/269).

However, the Conservative Government agreed that the Ministry should be wound up on the grounds that its role has disappeared with the ending of the state purchase of food.

With the amalgamation, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF) denied that it gave priority to farmers' interests and the Minister of Agriculture stated that he had a dual responsibility to the consumer and the producer (HC 77 1962, p.vii). Nevertheless, it seems that for most of the post-war period the interests of consumers have taken second place to farmers in the development of food and agricultural policy. There have been many occasions when the interests of farmers and consumers have been in conflict but the Ministry has backed the farmers case. In 1962 the Estimates Committee was told by a MAFF official that he took 'satisfaction from high market prices which reduce the amounts of our calls on Parliament,' (HC 77 1962, p.20) even though high market prices pushed up costs to consumers.

The predominance of agricultural policy and the exclusion of consumers has resulted in the absence of a clearly defined food policy community. Rather food policy, to the extent that it has existed, has been dominated by three interlinked policy communities: on the one side there is the agricultural policy community which included the farmers and MAFF and was

the most integrated and dominant community; Mills identifies the health and diet community which includes the Department of Health, the Committee on Medical Aspects of Food Policy, the BMA and Scientific advisers and there is the food community which deals with issues related to the food industry like hygiene standards, labelling etc. This includes the Ministry of Agriculture, the food industry and several advisory committees within MAFF. On certain issues these three communities come together to discuss issues which overlap.

There are several significant features of this network. First, it was almost completely dominated by the agricultural community. For most of the post-war period the food industry did not see its interests as conflicting with agriculture. The system of deficiency payments which provided price support before Britain joined the EEC allowed the food industry to have access to cheap food on the world market. Stocker (1983, p.247 and p.250) maintains that before Britain joined the EEC the food and drink industries saw little need for a concerted lobby and so did not develop an effective trade association. The food industry had access to MAFF and participated fully in discussion of food labelling and hygiene but rarely felt the need for lobbying. In a sense it was privileged so that its interests were represented without overt political activity (Lindblom 1977). Likewise with the diet and health community, Mills found that in the twenty five years after the second world war there was very little conflict between the diet and agricultural communities 'because the assumptions and goals of the two areas were compatible and indeed complimentary.' Agricultural policy was seen as providing cheap and wholesome food (Mills 1991). Health policy was an adjunct of agricultural policy.

In addition there was almost complete exclusion of consumer interests from these communities. The view of the Ministry of Agriculture was that the agricultural policy of the post-war period provided cheap food and so was in the interest of the consumer (Mitchell 1983, p.184 and p.187). On the occasion of the setting of farm prices the Ministry has admitted that, 'We do not specifically consult consumer associations...' (HC 137 1969, p.225). The National Consumers' Council (NCC) (1988, p.22) have stated that 'Statutory consumer representation on any food policy committee in the UK is minimal...' The main food policy committee is the Food Advisory Committee (NCC 1988, p.18). This includes only one consumer representative, its proceedings are secret and according to Cannon (1987) most of the members have close contacts with the food industry.

Consumer groups were not in a very strong position to force themselves into the policy communities. The consumer groups which existed tended to be limited in representation and priorities. Generally, consumer groups have paid little attention to food policy. Often they concern themselves with issues of product liability. In particular the largest independent consumer group - the Consumers' Association - has primarily adopted the role of testing goods for consumers rather than lobbying government (see Holbrook 1990). Consumer groups have also failed to become very representative. Consumer groups tend to be predominantly middle class (Giordan 1974) with a low density of potential membership. This undermines their legitimacy as representatives of consumers, diminishes their influence and justifies civil servants acting as 'our own quasi-consumer advisors.' (Stocker 1983, p.255). Even the agricultural consultative committees have had very little impact because their remit is limited to marketing boards (Martin and Smith 1968, p.128). The National Consumer

Council was set up by the government to represent consumer interests. It too is limited by its lack of membership and its links with government which sometimes make it unwilling to take radical positions that oppose government policy (Brompton 1989).

So consumer groups are poorly organised, poorly resourced and represent people who often have conflicting or ill-defined interests. They face well-organised, well-resourced groups with well clear interests on both the farming and food industry side who have direct and institutionalised access to government. Consequently, consumers were largely excluded from any role in food policy-making. Moreover, the agricultural domination of food policy meant that to a large extent the term is a misnomer. As Malcolm (1983, p.77) has pointed out the governments main statements on food and agricultural policy in the 1970s, the White Paper *Food from our own Resources* and *Farming and the Nation*, were 'characterised by their insularity, and their concentration on agricultural policy rather than food'. Whilst government actions have important implications for the food that is available, 'the ethic of freedom of choice has ensured only minimal government intervention in food purchase and consumption decisions.' (Josling and Ritson 1986, p.3). Food policy has been limited to technical issues of promoting free trade, preventing fraud and ensuring public health and safety (Grose 1983, p.216).

So from the 1950s to the 1980s food policy was largely an adjunct of a consensual agricultural policy which believed that by increasing production at home greater choice would be made available and all the government had to do was ensure freedom of choice and safety. Therefore food policy was a technical issue rather than a political issue. Consequently, there was no

need to involve consumers in policy-making because their interests were not being threatened. Britain's elite policy-making style (Jordan and Richardson 1982) included those involved in the food process - farmers, scientists, the food industry but excluded consumers on the grounds that the issues were technical not political. Consequently, Britain's food regulation is much less rigorous than that of the continent (Fort 1990). This community and perspective provides the context within which the issue of salmonella in eggs developed. With salmonella food became a matter of intense controversy. This raises the question of why the policy community failed. How did it allow food to become a political issue and new groups to enter the food policy debate? The paper will now examine how the issue of salmonella challenged traditional relationships.

#### SALMONELLA IN EGGS

The food policy community managed to depoliticise food policy to such an extent that food issues had become technical. The extent of depoliticisation is demonstrated by the treatment of food poisoning and salmonella before the eggs crisis. It was well known before 1988 that poultry contained a high level of salmonella (in fact 80 per cent of frozen chickens contained salmonella in 1980 (MAFF/DoH 1989, p.17)) and that the cases of salmonella enteritidis - the type associated later with eggs - had increased from 1,087 cases in 1981 to 6,858 in 1987 (Lancet 1988, p.720).

Nevertheless, the issue of salmonella in chickens did not become political. The view of the policy community was that salmonella in chickens was unavoidable and therefore the onus for the prevention of poisoning was on the consumer rather than the farmer or the government. The consumer, according to the London Food Commission (LFC) (1988), became

the first line of defence against food poisoning and so was responsible for the proper handling and cooking of chicken. This was an expression of the traditional liberal view that food policy was not the concern of government but a market transaction between producer and consumer. The government did not choose the option of destroying flocks with salmonella or preventing the recycling of slaughterhouse waste where infected birds might be returned to the food chain (Druce 1989, p.57). 'MAFF's own study of protein plants found that 21 out of 83 were contaminated, yet no prosecutions followed' (Lang 1989, p.151).

However, by the end of 1988 the issue of salmonella in eggs had become a very salient political issue with the resignation of a minister and the introduction of a compensation scheme for egg producers. Therefore it is necessary to examine why the issue became so political, how the policy community tried to handle it and the long-term implications for the case of salmonella in eggs.

There is some disagreement as to when the link between cases of *salmonella enteritidis* and eggs was first made. There had been increasing concern about the number of cases of *salmonella enteritidis* which by 1988 doubled to 13,004 (HC 108-II 1988/89, p. 1). The relationship with eggs first became apparent in the United States in 1985 (St Louis *et al* 1988). According to Sir Donald Ascheson, the Chief Medical Officer (HC 108-II 1988/89, p. 37):

The first occasion on which the MAFF was formally informed of our concerns about the possible role of eggs in the increasing numbers of human cases of *salmonella enteritidis* PT4 was on 4 November 1987...The issue was next formally raised with them in December 1987. At that stage, however, the evidence was not sufficiently clear for any firm conclusions to be drawn. It was only in the summer of 1988 that the link with eggs became clear.



John McGregor, then the Minister of Agriculture, confirmed that he was aware of a growing problem with *salmonella* in 1987 but between 1987 and 1988 discussion of the problem was limited to the policy community as MAFF and DoH attempted to determine the extent of the problem. In April 1988 the United States issued a warning that lightly cooked eggs could be a health hazard but the DHSS decided that there was no need for any new advice on preparing chicken or eggs (*The Times*, 16 April 1988). So by April 1988 MAFF and DoH were aware that a potential problem existed but believed that there was not enough of a risk to inform the public.

There are a number of interesting features to the story so far. The policy community realised that there a link between eggs and *salmonella* existed and it was a problem that could develop in Britain. Yet, policy-makers chose to keep the information out of the public domain. It appears that although there was no conscious decision to mislead the public, the attitude of the policy community was that the public should only be informed of the issue once there was hard evidence. They did not believe it necessary to take precautions whilst evidence was gathered. The degree of caution within the policy community is highlighted by the fact that Environmental Health Officers first linked *salmonella* to eggs in 1983 (HC 108-II 1988/89, p.93) and that in Hull concern with *salmonella* and eggs led to the local health authority stopping the use of raw eggs from mid February 1988 (HC 108-II 1988/89, p.99). The policy community was continuing its aim of depoliticising food by trying to prevent a scare and therefore initially attempted to keep information within the DoH and MAFF. Even the National Farmers' Union (NFU), a member of the policy community, did not know of the problem until May 1988 (NFU 1989, p.60).

However, the problem did not go away. The Department of Health and MAFF recognised by May 1988 that a link between the increased cases of food poisoning and eggs did exist and they continued to meet with scientists in order to determine the extent of the problem. According to John McGregor (HC 108 1988/89, p.166)

when the first evidence started to come to light that a new problem was emerging, it inevitably took the scientists some time to be absolutely clear what the nature of the problem was and to try to identify what one had to do in order to deal with it and what advice to give the public.

There were four meetings between MAFF, DoH and the Public Health Laboratory Service between June and August 1988 (HC 108-II 1988/89, p. 37). By July 1988 the PHLS had provided enough evidence to convince the DoH that there was a need to issue a warning to hospitals not to serve patients raw or undercooked eggs. However, a decision was taken not to inform the wider public (HC 108-II 1988/89, p.41). Richard North (1989) has provided a detailed account of events leading to the *salmonella* crisis. Before a decision was taken to issue a warning MAFF and DoH met the British Egg Industry Council and the NFU on the 13 June. DoH proposed three alternatives: to do nothing; to advise NHS against the use of unpasteurised eggs; to issue a public warning. A second meeting followed on 15 June when the DoH argued that the do nothing option was less viable and it was agreed to have a drafting meeting in order to prepare 'defensive briefings'. On the 30 July NHS catering staff were advised to take more care in the preparation of egg dishes and to use pasteurised eggs where raw egg required. In August the DoH, MAFF and BEIC met in order to agree a text to send to environmental health officers. Then on 18 November MAFF, BEIC and DoH met and 'From this emanated another press release' which warned the

wider public of the problem with eggs. As North reports press coverage was not very great (North 1989, pp.316-319).

Although the industry initially opposed the issuing of a warning it was prepared to cooperate in a statement of advice (BEIC 1989: 54). Nevertheless, the industry and the Ministry of Agriculture appear to have been successful in delaying the issuing of a warning to the general public until November 1988.

The strategy of the community was to try to retain the information and the control of the issue within their own network. The community wanted to limit the extent to which information was released in order to avoid political controversy (*The Times* 10 February 1989). They thus discussed what information should be released with the producers - the NFU and the BEIC - who saw the advice before it was made public. It is interesting that these issues were not discussed with consumer groups. MAFF in addition to trying to prevent a scare saw the best way of solving the problem through (MAFF/DoH 1989, p. 3):

Developing codes of practices, because this makes it possible to find practicable methods of reducing infection which actually work in normal husbandry conditions. Developing the codes in discussion with the industry was considered likely to be more effective more quickly than the introduction of comprehensive and detailed legislation...

Initially the egg industry and the Ministry of Agriculture opposed advising the wider public. Indeed the British Poultry Federation tried hard to persuade the DoH that issuing advice would confuse the consumer and unfairly damage egg producers (BEIC 1989, p. 58). Still, in the summer of 1988, the producers were involved in the development of codes of practices to try to eliminate salmonella from eggs from July 1988 (HC 108-II 1988/89, p.166). They were prepared to admit that a problem existed and that it

needed to be tackled but not that the public needed to be informed of it. The community continually tried to solve the problem within their own framework by limiting the groups involved in discussion; restricting the release of information and trying to solve the problem through discussions with the industry rather than as a political problem in the public domain.

This secrecy was not because of a cosy conspiracy. MAFF was insistent on rigorous codes which the egg industry had to implement or legislation would be introduced and MAFF refused to clear its final November press release with the producers (HC 108-II 1988/89, p.168). Nevertheless, it was easier if the policy-making process was restricted to scientists and producers. If the *salmonella* issue became public there would be pressure for much greater change and legislation, demands from more groups to become involved in policy-making and perhaps demands for new institutions. If the issue became party political it could also prove a vote loser. Yet despite the desire to keep the issue out of politics, this did not prove possible.

The affair dramatically hit the headlines when Edwina Currie declared that 'most of the egg production of this country, sadly, is now infected with *salmonella*.' This brought to the fore a whole range of conflicts which had existed within the policy community but had so far remained hidden from the public. Until this statement was made the community had tried to play down the extent of the *salmonella* crisis. Yet it is clear that throughout the period since May 1988 there had been major conflicts between the DoH and the Ministry of Agriculture with its producer clients. The BEIC thought that the Department of Health was wrong to issue advice direct to the consumer (BEIC 1989, p.58). In fact various egg producer organisation including the BEIC maintained that the evidence linking *salmonella* to eggs was circumstantial (HC 108-II 1988/89 p.68). They also

blamed free range producers rather than factory producers for the cases of *salmonella* (HC 108-II 1988/89, p.69). The Department of Health had felt throughout the period that MAFF was too protective towards the producers and so had prevented the Department issuing a warning earlier and toned down the warning when it appeared (*Sunday Times*, 11 December 1988). The main problem with Currie's statement was not really the allegation that most egg production was infected but the force with which she warned people against eating raw eggs.

→ So with Currie's statement these conflicts became public and *salmonella* emerged as a political issue. John McGregor rebuked Currie, accusing her of damaging the egg industry by giving misleading information (*Sunday Times*, 11 December 1988). This was followed by an intensive lobbying campaign by the NFU to have Currie removed and to obtain compensation for the damage she had caused to the Egg industry. According to Hughes *et al*, (1988) 'the industry's highly organised trade lobbies used every ounce of their political clout to bring about Currie's downfall.' The Government was told that producers would be encouraged to sue Mrs Currie for damages. The NFU's six poultry specialists coordinated a nationwide campaign. The NFU wrote to 200 MPs and many were give telephone briefings. The 1922 Executive discussed the issue and decided that Currie would have to resign and this information was passed to Currie via Waddington, the Chief Whip (Hughes *et al* 1988). As a response to wide-spread pressure the government then announced a compensation scheme to buy eggs from farmers and as a result Mrs Currie resigned (*The Times*, 17 December 1988).

It appeared that the powerful farmers lobby had been successful again. However, the reality is much more complex. The *salmonella* crisis was indicative of a general weakening of the position of the farmers partly as

a result of long-term changes in the food policy community . The farmers failed to keep the *salmonella* in eggs issue off the agenda. The policy community which had previously managed to avoid conflict was now subject to widespread political debate. Food poisoning was transformed from a issue of a technical nature and of individual hygiene to one of central political importance.

There were a number of short term factors which influenced this change. It is clear that the extent of the recent food poisoning outbreaks created a new problem with which the community had difficulty coping. A new problem had entered the food chain and scientists were unable to deal with this problem. However, the DoH and the MAFF had different views on how the problem should be tackled. MAFF saw it as a problem for the industry whilst the DoH saw it as a health problem. Consequently, the community no longer had a shared world view and the issue became political as a result of this interdepartmental conflict. Various actors resorted to overt political activity when the crisis blew up in the media. It appeared that the farmers won by getting compensation and the resignation of Currie.

However, the politicisation of food is demonstrative of the changes within the policy network. Moreover after Currie's statement the Ministry of Agriculture and Department of Health issued a stronger warning on the dangers of eating eggs (*The Times*, 14 December 1988); the Ministry of Agriculture announced a range of measures to tackle the problem of *salmonella* (*The Times*, 19 January 1989) and the Government issued a White Paper which was intended to reassure the consumer by promising stricter laws on food hygiene (Cm 732 1989).

Yet the real significance of the *salmonella* episode were the long-term causes and consequences of the event. Why was it in 1988 that *salmonella* became a political issue when previously food poisoning issues had been retained within the policy community as technical issues? The *salmonella* crisis was really the result of much wider changes in the food policy community and these changes are likely to have important effects on the nature of food issues and the way food policy is made.

#### THE LONG-TERM CAUSES AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE SALMONELLA AFFAIR

That *salmonella* in eggs became such an important political issue indicates that the policy community is not as it was for most of the post war period. We saw that previously food policy was dominated by concern for agricultural production. Consequently, within the community MAFF and the NFU played a leading role in policy-making whilst the food manufactures and the Department of Health were generally willing to accept the lead of the producers and MAFF. However, in recent years the food community has become much more open. Not only have the food manufactures and the Department of Health become increasingly active but new groups have become involved. The food retailers have enhanced their influence and political interests, the BMA have become more concerned with issues of diet, scientists and nutritionists, consumer groups and more radical groups like the London Food Commission have all become involved in food policy. Consequently, the agreement of food policy that previously existed has disappeared and food policy has become subject to conflict. It is this opening up of the policy community which allowed the eggs issue to be so controversial. Therefore this section will examine why this change has occurred and the impact that it has had on food policy and policy-making.

The most important change in the nature of the policy community has not been the result of pressure group action but due to a change in the economic position and interests of the food industry; in particular a change in the relationship between the food producers and the food retailers. As we saw previously, food producers had little reason to take on an active political role. Their interests were served by the Government's *laissez-faire* attitude to food policy. Thus food manufacturers, through the system of deficiency payments, had access to cheap food whilst the government did little to prevent the use of additives, preservatives and sugar in food production. The British food industry became successful through buying cheap food imports and adding value through the use of sugar, fats and additives in the production process (see Cannon 1987). The weakness of the consumer lobby and the view that health was related to choice meant that there was little political opposition to the food producers.

The economic dominance of food manufacturers was also maintained by the existence of retail price maintenance (RPM). By protecting small shops from competition, RPM kept the retail sector weak and divided and so the manufacturers were in a position to determine price (Gardener and Sheppard 1989: 154). Consequently, the British food industry has proved very successful. In 1974 20 per cent of the world's largest food companies were based in Britain and 4.3 per cent of enterprises employed 82.8 per cent of employees (OECD 1981, p.3). The British food industry became a highly concentrated and profitable industry. Hence, it felt little need for an overtly political role.

In the last ten or so years a number of factors have emerged which have forced the food manufacturers into a more political role. First, with



1 Britain's membership of the EC, Britain lost access to cheap food supplies.

Consequently, the interests of the food manufacturers and farmers diverged for the first time. The farmers have an interest in maintaining and increasing prices whilst the food manufacturers wish to see the reform of CAP in order to cut prices. Therefore, they now have to lobby MAFF and at the European level in order to have their interests represented. Traxler (1987, p.31) maintains that:

the regulative functions of the European Community affecting the food processing industry require an increased coordination of sectoral and intersectoral associative associations. This may lead to new patterns of organisation as happened with the formation of the Food and Drink Industries Council and the Dairy Trade Federation in Britain...

No longer are their interests automatically served by the policy community.

2 Secondly, as we will see later, there has been a greater interest in healthy food and concern about fats, additives and labelling. Again technical issues have become political and the food producers have had to become involved in political activity in order to defend their interests over issues such as labelling and health. The food industry has created organisations like the Sugar Bureau and the Butter Information Council to stress the healthy aspects of their food and to lobby on behalf of food manufacturers (Cannon 1987). The food industry has decided to tackle the health lobby head on. It has mounted an 'intense and expensive public relations campaign designed to discredit the health claims against their products made by activists'. For example, the sugar bureau which is jointly funded by Tate and Lyle and British sugar has challenged claims that sugar is bad for health (*The Guardian*, 4 July 1986).

3 Thirdly, the profitability of food manufacturers is constrained by the inelasticity of food demand. As income rises the proportion spent on food

declines. Consequently, the food economy has become a smaller part of the overall economy (OECD 1981, p.37). Hence, in order to maintain profitability, the food industry has had to become more competitive and more concentrated. Therefore the economic position of processors is more precarious as they compete for a static market and expand through merger.

The most significant factor in changing relationships within the community has been the rise of the food retailers. The growth in size and concentration of supermarkets has challenged both the economic dominance of the manufactures and their political interests. Since the 1960s the concentration and size of supermarkets has changed rapidly. According to Gardener and Sheppard (1989, pp.154-155):

Between 1961 and 1982 the number of shops selling food halved, whilst the number of supermarkets rose eighteenfold! Coupled with this, the retail market was becoming increasingly dominated by multiples. Between 1976 and 1987 they succeeded in increasing their market share from 57.1 to 78 per cent.

The food retailers have developed a very strong economic position. Their increased buying power has enabled them to force down supplier's prices (Gardener and Sheppard 1989, p.156). According to Faraggo (1987, p.166), 'Retail pressure is one of the major problems that confronts the food processing industry...'. In addition to growing economic importance the retail sector has become increasingly competitive as a small number of supermarkets have competed for a share of a relatively stable market. This competition has resulted in the retailers appealing increasingly to consumers as a means of attracting customers from competitors and so they have used their position to challenge the policy community on behalf of the consumer. This has occurred in two senses - one by traditional contacts and the other through by-passing the political system. Hence, the retailers

have become much more politically active and have for the time being sided with the consumer.

Individual retailers, and their trade association the Retail Consortium, have lobbied government on various food issues like food radiation; BSE and salmonella in eggs. For example, the supermarkets have attacked the government over its secret use of the hormone BST for increasing milk production. According to a Waitrose spokesman, 'The Government keeps saying that BST is safe, but we know our customers are concerned and we have no way to reassure them.' (*The Guardian*, 22 July 1988). Whilst food processors have found it difficult to develop trade associations and to organise to resist retail pressure, the retailers have become increasingly economically and politically important.

another dimension to consumerism  
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Yet, as we have seen, the food policy community has been slow to change and food manufacturers are in a position to oppose consumer and retail interests. Therefore retailers have used their economic power to ignore the policy community. Retailers are now so important to producers and manufacturers that they can impose their own regulations. Retailers have moved ahead of the government's food hygiene regulations and imposed rigorous standards on the companies that produce food for them. Marks and Spencers have introduced their own system of screening employees suspected of bacterial infection (HC 257 1988-89, pp.xiv-iv). In fact rather than the government imposing regulation on the retailers, the Social Services Select Committee recommended, 'that the Government take the existing practice of good employers in screening, treating and training in food handling as the basis for a code of practice' (HC 257 1988-89, p.xv).

In relation to issues of food labelling and healthy food, retailers have also advanced on government regulations. The supermarkets have responded

to consumer demand for healthy, well labelled and additive free food (Webb and Lang 1990; Gardener and Sheppard 1989). Despite the failure of the Government to act on these issues, in 1985 Safeway made its own products additive free; Tesco and Sainsbury have removed tartrazine and other artificial colours from their own brands and Tesco launched an independent healthy eating campaign (Gardener and Sheppard 1989, p.169). Tesco's system of food labeling is much more comprehensive and closer to the demands of consumer groups than any system that the Government has proposed (Cannon 1987, p.7). Retailers have also taken it upon themselves to ensure that their egg supplies come from *salmonella* free flocks and that their suppliers are following the Government's voluntary code (HC 118 1988/89, p.127). Certain supermarkets are also refusing to stock irradiated food (New Statesman Society 1989, p.8).

The retailers have to an extent undermined the policy community partly through representing interests in conflict with those of farmers and the food manufacturers but more importantly through by-passing the community completely. Hence, they have reacted to the market power of the consumers because of the competitiveness of retailing and in a sense introduced a new form of political action into the food arena. Food retailers are strong enough to develop 'private policy' in concert with their consumers and thus short-circuit the constraints and interests of the policy community. Thus they can impose their own standards on producers and manufacturers regardless of government policy. This has resulted in them taking a lead in areas of food policy. Tesco's healthy food campaign was a means of encouraging healthy eating and not just a reaction. The retailers demands for better hygiene has the impact of raising the issue of food handling and so force the government into taking the issue seriously.

This is in some senses a different form of Streek and Schmitter's private interest government. For Streek and Schmitter (1985, p.17) private interest government is an attempt to make 'associative, self-interested collective action contribute to the achievement of public policy goals'. Private actors participate in self regulation in order to assist the government in developing certain policies. In the case of food retailers in Britain they are regulating other private actors in response to consumer demand to achieve public goals. However, these are not policy goals set by government. They are set by the retailers, sometimes in response and sometimes ahead, of consumer demand and if anything they may be forced on government.

change in  
retailers  
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The increased economic power and political role of the retailers has incited the manufacturers to become more politically active. With the change in agricultural policy and rise of retail, health and consumer groups, food manufacturers have started to systematically lobby government. In 1973 the Food and Drinks Industry Council was formed and this represents 90 per cent of the food industry (Stocker 1983, p.240). The food industry has developed good links both with the Ministry of Agriculture and with Brussels (Grant 1987 and Cannon 1987) and has been closely involved in discussions on food labelling and hygiene (Stocker 1983). Mills (1991) reveals that in recent reforms of labelling legislation, 'Proposals forwarded by the various sectors of the food industry were incorporated into the guidelines at the expense of suggestions of consumer groups..'. The importance of this increased activity is that it is another factor contributing to the politicisation of food. It is interesting that recently the Conservative M.P, Tessa Gorman, has accused the food industry of 'putting up a very weak defence to attacks on your

integrity...Oppressive increases in regulation, in response to the public outcry, will surely follow unless you get your act together.' (Food Magazine July/September 1989, p.10).

In addition to changing relations between retailers and food producers the power of the farmers has also started to decline. Farmers are now much less economically important and their decline in terms of numbers suggest that any electoral influence they might have had has declined. New farm groups have developed, Conservative MPs have less attachment to rural issues than in the past and many on the right are critical of state support for agriculture. There has even been some cooling of relations between MAFF and the NFU (Smith 1990: 190-191). Thus the impact of the farmers on food policy has declined and this is another factor in the changing nature of the food policy network.

In addition to the changing power and interests of groups involved, the policy community has also been changed by the development of new issues. Food was becoming an increasingly political issue during the seventies. Inflation, CAP and a general world food shortage increased food prices rapidly and this led to growing concerns about poverty and nutritional intake. Groups like the Child Poverty Action Group and consumer groups campaigned on issues relating to the cost of food and the food quality of low income groups (Burnett 1989). Food prices were a major issue in the the 1973 referendum on EEC membership and the 1974 general elections (King 1977). The Labour Government also made food more political by introducing food subsidies in 1974 and by promising the TUC restraints on food price increases in return for incomes policy (CAS 1979, p.31).

There has also been increased concern over the link between health and food. Britain has one of the highest rate of coronary heart disease in the

world (NSS 1989). Since the mid-1970s new information has highlighted the relationship between diet and disease (CAS 1979, p.22-23; Mills 1991). Links between diet and heart disease were revealed through government reports (NACNE) and an independent review found that of 426 pesticides approved by MAFF, 124 were suspected of having links with cancer (NSS 1989: 1). Thus new scientific information has forced new issues on to the agenda with the help of campaigns by the media and pressure groups. Groups like the LPC, the BMA and nutritionists and scientist like Professor Richard Lacey have been very active in raising new food issues and linking food and disease. For example, the BMA as a very respectable and influential insider group has increasingly played a role in challenging the food industry. The BMA has lobbied government in an attempt to reduce sugar consumption and called for the Government to develop a policy for food and health (*The Guardian* 11 March 1986).

These debates appear to have had an impact. The advertising agency, DMB&B, found that 51 per cent of households were 'not only interested in the idea of healthier eating, but actively doing something about it'. (*The Guardian* 4 July 1987). Mills (1991) has also demonstrated that the assumption that increasing food production will provide a healthy diet has been questioned and therefore the Department of Health has started to take positions on health and diet which are in opposition to the Ministry of Agriculture. So diet has added a new contentious issue to the policy community and resulted in new groups trying to enter the political arena.

It is not only in the area of health that new information and technology have forced new issues into the community. To a large extent the threats to the community are a result of new technology in food production and new information about the dangers of food. One clear example is the case of

food irradiation. This is presented as a means of preserving food and so helping world hunger and preventing food poisoning (Webb and Lang 1990: 120). However, incidents such as Chernobyl, have made radiation a controversial issue. Certain retailers, consumer groups and trade unions have opposed the irradiation of food and consequently, the food industry has embarked on an international campaign to win approval (see Webb and Lang 1990).

Technology has also raised new issues through the development of factory farming. By keeping a large number of animals in a confined area diseases quickly pass through stocks. Consequently, a high death rate is expected and so a large dose of antibiotics have to be used in the production of pigs and chickens. Intensive techniques have also resulted in the spreading of disease through the food chain. As cows have been fed sheep, BSE has developed in cows; chickens have been fed the remains of chickens and so salmonella is reproduced in the chicken population (*The Guardian*, 29 January 1990). New technology has produced new problems with which the policy community has had to deal. There has also been the increased use of additives, pesticides and hormones in food production and increasingly the production of information on the impact that these chemicals have on the human population. Peterson (1989) has indicated that developments in biotechnology will have a major impact on the agricultural policy community by raising the level of production even further at a time of surplus. Again it raises questions about control and regulation of biotechnology and the impact it could have on the population.



## A NEW POLICY COMMUNITY? A NEW POLITICS OF FOOD?

Undoubtedly these factors have combined to change the issues and groups involved in food policy. What was once a closed and united policy community dealing with what were seen as technical issues has changed into a wider policy network. The *salmonella* in eggs incident was not an isolated affair but an indication of the way the food policy community is developing. The salmonella affair highlighted changes that had been occurring since the 1970s. It was part of a process whereby these changes allowed the eggs crisis to occur. Once it happened it demonstrated how food policy had changed and it accelerated the politicisation of food issues which in turn drew more groups into the policy process. This change has not been the result of a single event but a combination of factors.

New groups have entered the political arena; other groups have seen their interests and role transformed; and new issues have developed. Now retailers, food manufacturers, scientists and consumers all play a more vociferous role in food policy.

At one time British agricultural policy was seen as being concerned with providing cheap food and suited consumers, retailers and manufactures. Recently, new issues have entered the political agenda partly because of the activities of these groups but also because of new information, changes in the economy and new technology. Britain's adoption of the common agricultural policy created conflicts of interest within the community. In addition new technology and new information have raised new issues that the community has not been able to deal with within its value system. Once food became a political issue, it was difficult to exclude groups particularly with widespread media attention. In the late eighties a whole range of issues arose pesticides, additives, listeria, salmonella, cook

chill, microwaves, BSE, hormones, biotechnology. The salmonella issue was not a one off but indicative of the way the issue of food has changed. It became a key issue which further fractured the policy community.

No longer was there a single decision-making centre but the Ministries of Health and Agriculture took on opposing views and tried to define new responsibilities. In trying to support their own positions they opened the policy community further by bringing in new groups and politicising to a greater degree the issue of food. Consequently, the government has promised to introduce measure to improve food hygiene. New legislation is intended to make sure food technology and distribution is safe; prevent misleading labelling; strengthen existing hygiene laws; extend laws to take account of new technologies; registration of commercial food premises; powers to make emergency control orders and provision for training of those who handle food commercially (CM 732 1989, pp.4-5).

Is there now a new network? It is clear that groups which to some extent were passive or partial members of the policy community have now become active. There has been pressure from many groups, consumer groups, the Institute of Environmental Officers, LFC, backbench Conservative MPS, the BMA, nutritionists and the Labour Party to change the way that food policy is made either by reforming the Ministry of Agriculture or placing responsibility for food issues under the control of a Ministry for Consumer Affairs. The DoH is no longer prepared to accept the MAFF's lead. Hence, they have been much more active in giving a role to Doctors and nutritionists; also retailers food manufactures and consumers are now active and in conflict.

There have, in addition, been institutional changes. The Ministry of Agriculture has created a new advisory committee to look 'urgently', with a

view to recommending action, at specific questions relating to the increasing incidence of microbiological illnesses of foodborne origin, particularly salmonella, listeria and campylobacter.' (CM 732 1989, p. 9). This committee signifies the new political sensitivity of food issues. Its role is to 'be a trouble shooting one, fielding food poison scares as they appear and offering the government swift and expert advice.' (Hughes 1989). MAFF is also to provide institutional access for consumer groups. The Ministry of Agriculture is to create a new Consumer panel which is intended as 'a direct means of conveying their views of food protection issues to the Ministry.' (The Food Magazine, January/February 1990).

Yet it is important not to exaggerate the degree of change. The Government has lifted the ban on irradiated food despite the concerns of various groups. The Department of Health has been accused of trying to limit information on the extent of cook-chill poisoning in hospitals (North 1989) and the Social Services Committee found that the Department of Health knew of the problem of listeria in 1987 but did not issue a warning to pregnant women until February 1989 (after the salmonella affair) (HC 257 1988/89, p.xi). The political sensitivity of food issues resulted in the Department of Health not issuing a warning about listeria in pate until two months after it was discovered (The Guardian 14 July 1989). Over the issue of BSE the government originally ignored consumer pleas to pay full compensation for infected cows. Initially MAFF only banned the use of offal in baby foods and originally refused to make BSE a notifiable disease on the grounds that there was no proof that the disease could spread to humans. It was only eighteen months after the disease was discovered that Minister of Agriculture ordered that all cattle with BSE be destroyed (The Guardian, 11 July 1988) and only in June 1989 that the use of offal was

banned (The Guardian, 12 June 1989). This apparently demonstrates MAFF's continued willingness to side with the producers when there is doubt.

In the case of the hormone BST the government has refused to reveal which farms are using BST and so consumers have been denied the right to choose whether or not to buy milk which contains the hormone. The Government has so far refused to ban the use of the hormone despite the fact that the Veterinary Products Committee is secretly advising the Government against the production of BST (The Guardian, 11 July 1988). The Government has even rejected the main recommendation of the first report of the new Committee on Microbiological Safety of Food that a prior approval licencing system be introduced for various institutions dealing with food (The Food Magazine, April/June 1990).

There still seems to be a high degree of exclusion of consumers. The NCC has revealed that consumer groups have found it difficult to get onto consultation lists; that they were only consulted after decisions have been reached; that consumer groups often lack expertise and they often do not have sufficient time to respond to government proposals (NCC 1988: 32).

The Ministry of Agriculture has continued to be secretive over the issue of salmonella in eggs. They have refused to clarify the situation. MAFF's new consumer board contains four representatives nominated by government funded consumer bodies and only one nominated by an independent group - the Consumers' Association. Radical groups like the LFC and Parents For Safe Food continue to be excluded (The Food Magazine, January/March 1990).

#### CONCLUSION

It is clear that with the politicisation of food and new entrants into the policy network, food policy-making is not what it was. The salmonella

affair reveals the extent to which food has become a key political issue and how the once consensual food policy community has become divided and conflictual and much more open to new interests. In trying to explain this change we have an interesting comparison with agriculture. The agricultural policy community is closely related sharing a number of members and has been faced with great pressure for change but has so far managed to deal with the change largely within the policy community (Smith 1989). Why does the food policy community appear to have fractured whilst the agricultural policy community has to some extent stayed in tact?

The agricultural community has a more limited range of actors and decision-making centres. The economic actors within agriculture are limited to farmers and decisions are made largely by the Ministry of Agriculture in Britain and the Council of Ministers in Europe. The European dimension offers the agricultural community extra protection because the Council of Ministers continues to be dominated by agricultural interests and so reform of the CAP is very piecemeal.

With food there are two decision-making centres; MAFF and DoH. This was not a problem when they agreed on policy but once new interests and policies developed they adopted conflicting positions. This created political controversy in the community and therefore resulted in more groups being involved. Moreover the policy community had many more powerful actors - scientists, doctors, farmers, food manufacturers and retailers. Again this was not a problem whilst there was little controversy over policy but once new issues were raised conflict broke out between groups that each had important resources. In addition new issues were forced onto the agenda by new groups and the media. Because the policy community did not agree on how these issues should be dealt with

they became politicised. This was undoubtedly helped by the fact that food issues, like heart disease, additives and food poisoning touch people much more directly than agricultural support prices. Perhaps most important is the way in which food did have an economic actor in the food retailers with real power that could break through the policy community. This is something that is lacking in agriculture as the main challengers tend to be relatively weak consumer and environmental groups.

In explaining how policy communities change it appears that some are more open to change than others. If a potential for conflict exists, there is more than one decision-making centre and the community contains a range of powerful actors then the possibility of new issues and groups entering the policy community is greater. Clearly, new or reactivated pressure groups, are important in opening up a community but there has to be a means for these groups to enter. So groups are assisted in their task if new issues or information cut across the policy community and create new problems with which the community cannot cope. In food the existence of two state actors which disagreed on how to deal with new problems meant that the food policy arena quickly became political and this provided other groups an opportunity to undermine the community.

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