INTRODUCTION

NATHALIE COOKE, Associate Dean, Faculty of Arts, McGill University
ROD MACRAE, Policy Consultant
GRACE SKOGSTAD, University of Toronto

Papers in this special issue emerged from a February 2006 conference[1] hosted by the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada (or the MISC). Since 1995, the MISC has hosted an annual national conference on public policy issues of pressing concern to the Canadian public. The MISC's conferences bring together decision-makers, researchers, practitioners, activists, students and the general public from diverse and often conflicting perspectives. The annual conferences create unique opportunities to network and share ideas, and they receive national television and print coverage in both English and French, which communicates developments in the debate to a wider audience. These bilingual events attract large audiences of 350-400 participants.

In 2006, for its eleventh annual conference, the MISC focused its attention on the problems of food in Canada – with a particular focus on food policy and the shaping of taste and culture. Like other MISC conferences, it opened with a public event on the first evening, followed by two full days of panel sessions. In this instance, one day was devoted to identifying specific problems in food policy and practice (what *are* Canadians eating?), and the other to proposing solutions (what *will* Canadians eat?). Approximately 35 speakers were invited and each were asked to speak for 5-7 minutes, a format that allowed for plenty of time for audience questions.

The Planning Colloquium:

On May 26, 2005, the MISC hosted a planning colloquium to assess the current state of food policy in Canada and determine the goals of the 2006 conference. The participants included representatives from federal ministries, health and agricultural agencies, news outlets, and three Montreal universities.[2] They proposed speakers, suggested sources of funding, and identified policy weaknesses.

The consensus that emerged from the colloquium was that (a) the time was right for a Canadian food policy conference and (b) it should target the issue of the lack of cross-disciplinary integration in Canadian food policy.

a) The Time was Right

The moment was right for this type of conference, given public concern about nutrition, media interest in food safety, emerging data on Canadian food choices, and the restructuring of Canada's Food Guide. Important forums on obesity, foodways, and food security were scheduled for 2005 and 2006, but they would not address – as this event would – Canadians' collective food behaviours and the forces that shape them. A conference on Agri-Food and Health Innovation mounted in Toronto (2005), for example, failed to address the bilingual dimension of Canadian food culture. The aim of a September 2005 conference on food security was to found a new national organization, Food Secure Canada, but it addressed topics relating to only one subset of the set of concerns that were later raised at the MISC conference. Boston University was planning to host a conference on *The Social Spaces of Food and Agriculture in June 2006*, but its focus was to be primarily on the United States. These conferences simply lacked the scope and balance of representation that we hoped would distinguish the MISC conference, then entitled *What Will Canadians*

Eat (the double entendre on the word "will" fully intended).

In addition, the MISC conference would build on the momentum created by a conference hosted at the McCord Museum in November 2005, co-organized by two members of the MISC conference steering committee – Nathalie Cooke and Victoria Dickenson (McCord Museum Director and member of the MISC Board of Governors). The McCord conference, entitled *The Daily Meal in Canada*,[3] would focus on historical food practices or what Canadians *used* to eat, past tense.

b. Cross-disciplinary integration in Canadian food policy

A comprehensive Canadian Food Strategy was attempted in the 1970s, but failed to be fully implemented. Since then, no comprehensive food policy has been formulated, despite awareness on the part of government ministries, health agencies, and charitable foundations that their strategic investments often contradict each other. Furthermore, these conflicting or misaligned agendas send a confusing message to the health-conscious public, who depend on experts for advice on their consumer choices. Participants agreed that a university conference could provide a more neutral space for debate than an event sponsored by a specific policy body, as well as lend credibility to the findings disseminated to an increasingly bewildered public.

The format of the MISC conference is intended to compel stakeholders to negotiate their positions in a relational matrix, instead of simply reiterating their standard positions. For example, the Agricultural Policy Framework has been developing infrastructural agreements between the federal government and the provinces and territories since 2001, but solely within its restricted domain. One strategic aim of the food conference, then, was to encourage the agricultural sector to work more closely with representatives from health, marketing, and the environment, and for these sectors to have a more complete understanding of agricultural realities.

Structuring the Conference:

Broadly, we were interested in better understanding the collective food choices of Canadians, and how our social, cultural, economic, and policy environments shape food choices. Virtually all segments of Canadian society are affected in some way by our collective food choices, from children growing up in poverty to isolated seniors, from food producers to Aboriginal populations that historically relied on traditional wild foods, from downtown dwellers living in food retail deserts to rural townspeople whose services are slowly dwindling as farm depopulation occurs. Some of the most discussed subjects of the day – obesity, rising costs of health care, the farm income crisis, genetic engineering, globalization, and climate change – are all shaped by our collective food choices. Yet current policy analyses lack an interactive focus and isolate areas of interest in a manner that underestimates the complexity of the issues at hand.

Panel sessions were organized around particular questions: Why is the Canadian public concerned about food? What do Canadians find to be the most important challenges to address – loss of taste, worries about food safety, costs, genetic engineering, how kids are eating, what to eat, what not to? Who is poised to make changes to the way our food system is organized? What kinds of changes to food – rather than to nutrition or agriculture – policy are being proposed? Is there room for an integrated food policy? This conference would bring together delegates that would normally be separated by geographical, disciplinary, and institutional boundaries to debate the current and future direction of food policy in Canada. Contributions from civil society, farmers and food businesses, health professionals, concerned citizens, students, and all levels of government will shape our understanding of the challenges and how to advance improvements. Currently, each sector favours a different methodology – such as innovation systems theory in economics, and chaos theory in management – which hinders dialogue between researchers working on different aspects of the same problems, unless they are thrust together in a collaborative environment.

As such, this conference would be the first large scale interdisciplinary forum in 25 years to bring together a full range of actors, including health, agriculture, and industry representatives, to debate the current and future direction of food policy in Canada. It would enable policy makers to better recognize the different facets of their policy domains and their interconnections, as well as encouraging policy makers to establish contacts outside of their principal field.

The conference itself, **What Are We Eating? Towards a Canadian Food Policy/Qu'est-ce qu'on mange? Pour une politique alimentaire canadienne** – was also made possible thanks to a generous

donation from the Max Bell Foundation, as well as contributions from a diverse number of sectors including Health Canada; Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada; Ontario Ministry of Health Promotion; McGill's Faculties of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences, Arts, Management, Medicine; McGill Food Services; McCord Museum and the Café McCord; McAuslan Breweries; and *Canadian Living* Magazine.

This issue and the focus on demand – side policy themes

Governments have traditionally intervened on the supply side of the food policy equation. Their intervention has produced many benefits, though many challenges remain. The demand side (what and how much people eat, why they eat as they do, how food tastes are shaped, and what it costs to eat well) has received, for a variety of reasons, decidedly less attention from policy makers. Given a vast array of possible special issue themes, we chose to focus on the demand side of the equation – as the selection of articles in this issue indicate – our contribution aimed at redressing this historical deficiency.

Endnotes

[1] In this discussion of the MISC conference format we draw from a number of MISC documents – funding applications and reports, correspondence with panelists and organizational committee members – constructed variously by those involved in organizational logistics. We would particularly like to recognize the invaluable assistance of Lynne Darroch, Ian Rae (Max Bell Postdoctoral Fellow 2004-5), Johanne Bilodeau, and Melanie Predacowyz. Nathalie Cooke is also grateful to the SSHRC for support of her ongoing investigation of Canadian food practice.

[2] See detailed list of participants and their professional affiliations printed in this issue.

[3] See <http://www.misc-iecm.mcgill.ca/enpages/pdf/food_progform_30sept05.pdf#search=%22The%20Daily%20Meal%20in%20Canada%20%22>.

PLANNING COLLOQUIUM

What's to Eat in Canada? / Qu'est-ce qu'on mange au Canada?

Thursday, May 26, 2005 – 12:00-5:00 / Le jeudi 26 mai 2005 de 12 h à 17 h
Thomson House, 3650, rue McTavish, Montréal

PARTICIPANTS

Julian Armstrong
Journalist, Montreal Gazette, Montreal

Johanne Beaulieu
Director, Policy Coordination and Integration, Food Safety and Quality Policy, Agriculture Canada, Ottawa

Paul Bélanger
Assistant Director, Institute of Nutrition, Metabolism and Diabetes, Canadian Institute of Health Research, Ottawa

Deborah Buszard
Dean, Agricultural and Env. Sciences, McGill, Montreal

Shelley Butler
Visiting Assistant Professor, McGill Institute for the Study of Canada, Montreal

David Castle
Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy, University of Guelph, Guelph

Nathalie Cooke
Canadian Studies Programme Director, MISC and Associate Professor, Department of English, Montreal

Victoria Dickenson
Executive Director, McCord Museum of Canadian History, Montreal

Elizabeth Driver
Program Officer, Foodways Montgomery's Inn Museum, Toronto

Laurette Dubé
Faculty of Management, McGill University, Montreal

Anne Fowlie
Executive Vice-President, Canadian Horticultural Council, Ottawa

Bob Friesen
President, Canadian Federation of Agriculture, Ottawa

Heather Holland
On-Farm Food Safety, Cdn Fed. of Agriculture, Ottawa
Department of Theatre and Dance, History of Rhetoric and Performance, University of California, Davis

Lara Khoury
Assistant Professor, Faculty of Law, McGill, Montreal

Kristine G. Koski
Director, Dietetics & Human Nutrition, McGill, Montreal

Mary L'Abbé
Director, Bureau of Nutritional Sciences Food Directorate, Health Canada, Ottawa

Rod MacRae
Seagram Chair, McGill Institute for the Study of Canada and Food Policy Analyst, Toronto

Antonia Maioni
Director, McGill Institute for the Study of Canada, Montreal

Marie Marquis
Professeure agrégée, département de nutrition, Université de Montréal, Montreal

Lyne Mongeau
Conseillère scientifique, Développement des individus et des communautés, Institut national de santé public du, Montreal, Quebec

Rhona Richman Kenneally
Assistant Professor, Department of Design and Computation Arts, Concordia University, Montreal

Stephen Samis
Director, Health Policy, Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada, Ottawa

Joe Schwarcz
Director, McGill Office for Science and Society, Montreal

Paul Thomassin
Associate Professor, Department of Agricultural Economics, McGill University, Montreal

Elbert van Donkersgoed
Strategic Policy Advisor, Christian Farmers Federation of Ontario, Guelph