WHY IS THERE NO CANADIAN FOOD POLICY IN PLACE?



ABSTRACT

In wealthy countries, the transformation from food as the means of survival to food as life style has begun to raise many questions about the linkages between food, health and the environment. Changes in economy and society have been fostered not only by massive technological change, but also by very substantial policies and programs by governments in agriculture and food over the last century. This paper explores the evolving role of governments over time, the dramatic changes in the role of food in society, the political economy of food policy formation itself, and the need for debate on appropriate food related policies for Canada's future. As health care costs represent the largest growth item in government budgets, the emerging linkage between food choices and health care costs cannot be ignored.

RÉSUMÉ

Dans les pays riches, l'alimentation est passée d'un moyen de survie à un mode de vie, transformation qui commence à soulever de nombreuses questions sur les liens entre l'alimentation, la santé et l'environnement. Les changements économiques et sociaux ont été causés par l'évolution rapide de la technologie, mais aussi par de très importants programmes et politiques en matière d'agriculture et d'alimentation qui ont été instaurés par le gouvernement au cours du siècle dernier. Cet article explore l'évolution du rôle du gouvernement au fil du temps, l'importante transformation du rôle de la nourriture dans la société et l'économie politique régissant le façonnement de la politique alimentaire. On y souligne la nécessité de tenir un débat sur la mise en place de politiques appropriées en matière d'alimentation pour l'avenir du Canada. Au moment où les coûts des soins de santé représentent le plus important poste budgétaire en expansion des gouvernements, on ne peut négliger le lien entre ces coûts et les choix en matère d'alimentaiton.

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Introduction

Agriculture and the resulting food production have been the primary economic endeavour supporting human survival from the time of hunter/gatherer societies until about 150 years ago. Until well into the 19th century, the vast majority of households in North America were involved in agriculture. Today, many countries, particularly the least developed nations, continue to have the greater share of their populations involved in food production, and food insecurity still affects nearly one billion people in the world. In postmodern societies, food purchases now represent 10 percent or less of household expenditure, and agricultural production involves only about two percent of the work force. Even in this case, only 10 to 20 percent of those in agricultural production generate 80 to 90 percent of all food supply. This shift from a principally agrarian society to an industrialized and postmodern society has taken place over the past 150 years in North America and Europe, and many other countries are well advanced in this transformation. In wealthy countries, the transformation from food as the means of survival and subsistence to food as life style has begun to raise many questions that were not posed in earlier societies about the linkages among food, health and the environment.

The changes in economy and society have been fostered not only by massive technological change, but also by very substantial policies and programs by governments in agriculture and food for well over a century. Indeed, the impacts of these governmental actions in agriculture and food lie at the heart of the international trade negotiations completed in 1994 and the impasse in the current WTO Doha Development Round negotiations. In this context, the title for this article and conference panel, "Why is there no food policy in Canada?" seems odd, out of place, and

inconsistent with a record of government involvement in agriculture and food. This paper examines this apparent inconsistency, and the context and relevance of the topic with regard to the conference as a whole. Exploring the evolving role of governments over time, the dramatic changes in the role of food in society, and the political economy of food policy formation itself, focuses serious and much needed debate on appropriate food related policies for the future in Canada.

Conference scope

The conference focuses on food consumers of all types: the young, the aged, families, singles, and native and ethnic groups in Canada. It includes the characteristics and norms surrounding food and food choices, including health, safety and quality, nutrition, variety, life style, eating habits and diets, as well as the linkages to health, wellness and illness, and the impacts of food choices on our environment. Industry structure and concentration involving inputs, farm production, distribution and retail outlets, round out the topics for the conference. These areas go well beyond the more traditional scope for agriculture and food policy in Canada, and result from the emerging concerns linking food with health and environmental issues in the Canadian society and economy.

The changing role of government

From an historical perspective, the traditional scope for agriculture and food policy has been founded on "an ample supply of safe, high quality food at reasonable prices for all Canadians."[2] For some, it has been characterized as a "cheap food policy" for Canadians. For others, it represents responding to consumer desires and choices in an open market economy. Domestic suppliers and importers have responded to whatever consumers have wanted at a competitive price, so long as two conditions were met: that food was "safe," and that participants in the market respected trade, commercial, and competition law.

The scope of governmental action in Canada has evolved considerably over the past century. The political foundations for governmental intervention and "consumer choice" in the market place can be illustrated by the writings of John Stuart Mill in the 19th century:

> "governments ought to confine themselves to affording protection against force and fraud: that these two things apart, people should be free agents, able to take care of themselves and that so long as a person practices no violence or deception to the injury of others in person or property, legislatures and governments are in no way called upon to concern themselves about him."[3]

Mill's view of the role of government fostered many of the early actions in agriculture and food through weights and measures, grain grading, transportation regulation for grains, and food safety requirements in the meat industries. The policies were to protect market participants – both buyers and sellers of food and food products – but in the early years they did not extend to direct governmental involvement in food commerce. That is, the role of government was generally restricted to the prevention of violence or deception in the market place by third parties.

At the farm level, governments began to change Mill's paradigm during the 1930s. Along with the implementation of Keynesian principles in the 1930s and subsequent decades, governments began to accept that direct intervention was needed in the event of "market failure." Direct governmental involvement in marketing, grading and inspection, income support, and risk management, became common. It continues today, consistent with the more general policy of the government's obligation to ensure "an ample supply of safe, high quality food at reasonable prices for all Canadians…" However, governments have maintained Mill's dictum with regard to the food consumer. While policies have been established for food safety and quality, food additives, packaging and labeling, weights and measures, advertising and false claims, buyers' and sellers' competitive behaviour, and trade agreements affecting Canadian consumers, the food choices made by consumers have been beyond the normal scope for governmental action. In general, governmental action has been taken on the supply side, but not on the demand side for consumer food choices.

More generally, governments have only recently begun limiting consumer choice or providing information campaigns to alter the choices of consumers. Clearly many addictive drugs have been banned from sale in Canada, and other legal products have been increasingly restricted for production, sale, and use. Examples are the growing limitations on the sale and use of tobacco and tobacco products, and information campaigns on alcohol abuse. Less rigorous examples include the

new food guide in Canada, combining information on nutrition and diets with the role of exercise in healthy life styles. Another example is the accelerating attention given to the impact on the environment of consumer choices. While the traditional concern of product attributes remains, increasing attention is directed to the environmental and health effects of the processes by which products are generated.

The governmental actions on such products as tobacco and alcohol stem from the growing body of evidence linking the deleterious effects on human health and safety with use of these products, and the recognizable costs to individuals and society arising from their use. For food products, however, information campaigns have been the preferred course for governmental action so far. Nonetheless, there is growing evidence that consumers' food choices can be linked to obesity, heart disease and stroke, aging processes, and physical and mental childhood development. More sketchy evidence suggests linkages between food choices and various forms of cancer.[4] On the environmental side, considerable change has already begun in food packaging and processing, both directly for consumers as well as food processors, to limit or reduce the environmental impact of food and food products.

Why consider change?

For governments whose health care costs are the largest growth item in budgets, the emerging linkage between food choices and health care costs cannot be ignored. As well, the costs of consumer food choices extend beyond government treasuries. In addition to the budgetary cost, the effects on overall economic growth, human welfare and labour force productivity in an aging society compound the problem through lower growth and lost productivity in the economy. Such costs are increasingly important in a globalizing world. Finally, many of the costs associated with consumer choice fall on individuals, beyond the reach of current governmental programming, damaging the human condition in general and harming some individuals and groups in society specifically.

The recognition of these linkages and costs stems from the accelerating evidence from the physical and biological sciences. While traditional research lines largely held human, animal, and plant sciences in separate realms, the convergence of biological science research across all life forms and its integration with societal behaviour have rapidly augmented the frontiers of knowledge about the health and environmental choices made by consumers. As well, societal concern on several fronts, based in part on science and discovery, and in part on myth, has been translated into campaigns for action by private industry as well as government. Although responses have been slow in coming, several changes in industry can be noted. Nestlé, for example, has changed its selling habits for baby formula in most of the developing world. School lunch programs in the USA are venturing into placing limitations on the availability of high calorie, low nutrition food products in schools. Soft drink manufacturers are starting to limit their sales of high sugar/energy products in schools. Fast food providers are changing packaging methods and materials to demonstrate greater environmental friendliness.

Governments have remained extremely reluctant to regulate or restrict consumer food choices. Nonetheless, information campaigns by governments stress improved nutrition in combination with exercise. The reason behind these campaigns is that knowledge and awareness levels in Canadian society about food-nutrition-environmental linkages are highly variable and differ greatly across age groups, life style, region, ethnic background, and work place environments.

One of the factors contributing to the rapid changes in consumer choice of foods has been the increased pace of our society both at work and at home. Evening meal time preparation now is 30 minutes or less in most households; workplace pressures mean eating on the go. Both these situations demand ready to eat and highly processed foods, chosen on the basis of taste and convenience. The great difficulty is that taste is often associated with sugar, salt, fat, alcohol and chocolate, the ingredients often cited as problematic in health considerations!

Issue and institutional complexity

From the political economy point of view, an issue is why – when faced with the growing weight of evidence linking food with health and environment – governments have been so hesitant to wade into the field of limiting consumer choice. One of the dilemmas for all governments is the widely dispersed mandates of government agencies. A brief listing demonstrates this dispersion:

- Health Canada: food safety and quality regulations; human health protection; food and drug regulation
- Agriculture and Agri-food Canada: food supply chain development; animal and

plant research; export promotion
- Canadian Food Inspection Agency: food safety implementation; animal and plant health regulations and implementation; food import and export inspections and testing
- Environment Canada: environmentally friendly production and processes regulation; hazardous chemicals; pesticides
- Industry Canada: consumer protection; biotechnology
- International Trade Canada (in conjunction with several federal departments): international trade agreements; *Codex Alimentarius*; animal and plant health
- Indian and Northern Affairs: health and welfare of native peoples
- Provincial governments: health care; education; social services; agricultural development; rural development
- Medical research: universities; private sector research; government research through the National Research Council, Medical Research Council

There is no traditional or current common institutional arrangement linking the institutions which share responsibility for the range of issues involved in regulating consumer choice in food, food products, and production processes. As an example, such issues would need to be managed by at least three Cabinet committees in the federal government: social affairs, economic affairs, and foreign affairs and national security. As well, few issues rest within one order of government. While federal-provincial meetings of ministers are common in Canada, such meetings tend to have a restricted scope within similar mandates. Examples include the regular meetings of health ministers, agriculture ministers, or environmental ministers. However, joint meetings of health and agriculture ministers, for example, are rare or nonexistent. The consequence is that there are exceedingly limited opportunities for joint action across ministerial mandates and orders of government to deal with the breadth of scope involved in the food-health-environmental linkages.

Such horizontal issues facing governments are not new. However, creating and sustaining the horizontal efforts within and across governments has proven very challenging, requiring significant political courage and persistence. Examples include the creation of the rural secretariat, domiciled in Agriculture and Agri-food Canada (AAFC), in order to bring together more than 25 departments and agencies within the federal government to tackle the cross cutting issues facing rural and remote communities. This effort also involves encouraging the relevant groups and agencies at both provincial and municipal levels to participate in coordinated action. As well, the biotechnology secretariat, located in Industry Canada, brought together a number of departments and agencies directly involved in the development, regulation and implementation of biotechnology, including an external advisory committee. Progress on issues in these circumstances tends to be agonizingly slow and extremely difficult, unless one or more Ministers – who are already overloaded in most portfolios – take the time and effort to breathe urgency into sustained progress.

Recent progress

The Agricultural Policy Framework (APF),[5] established as an agreement between federal and provincial governments for the period 2003 to 2008, has made some progress in linking food safety and quality, environment, business risk management, renewal, innovation and trade. This agreement marks a number of firsts in the food and agriculture policies for Canada. Within the scope of the framework, the federal government provides equity in its responses across regions, commodities, and markets for farmers. It is also the first time that major federal provincial agreements have gone beyond income stabilization and business risk management, linking these measures to environmental and food safety and quality concerns. As well, as part of the agreement, joint funding arrangements were created across AAFC and Health Canada regarding food safety and quality, and between AAFC and Environment Canada for strengthening environmental sustainability in the farm and food sectors. The underlying purpose of the agreements was to brand Canada as the source of the most environmentally friendly and safe food in the world. Nonetheless, the agreements are entirely "supply side" driven, and do not enter the realm of modifying or regulating consumer choice regarding food and food products.

Putting the APF in place was a lengthy, difficult, and politically challenging exercise that took more than three years. However, the APF covers only the agriculture and food sectors from the supply side, and, only deals incidentally with the man-

dates concerning health and environment. Even then, it does so within the federal government and not the provincial mandates in health and environment. To consider the wider policy scope suggested by this conference on the demand side, with the direct linkage to consumer choice of food and diet coordinated with human health and the environment, implies a gargantuan task of horizontal and vertical coordination across all three orders of government in Canada.

Where do we go from here?

In summary, governments' role has been concentrated historically on the supply side of the food and agriculture continuum. Only recently have government actions begun to enter the realm of consumer choice, and in these instances, outside the food sector. In general, the governmental roles in food and agriculture have stopped just before the consumer makes the choice of what to eat, where to eat, and how to eat it. Nonetheless, the clear and growing recognition of the costs to individuals and government treasuries of the "freedom of consumer choice paradigm" poses serious questions about continuing on this track. If the government were to assume a role in directly affecting consumer choices it would face immense coordination difficulties within and across governments. As well, government regulation of food must be consistent with science based trade rules.

Based on Mill's dictum, a "food policy" is in place in Canada! However, to go further than the supply side issues, there are some basic questions which Canadians and policy makers face:

Q: Do we want governments to help manage our dietary food choices?

A: Doing so would represent a major change in policy direction and governmental role. Canadians would need to be broadly convinced of the need for such a change before policy makers begin venturing into this territory.

Q: Can governments afford not to take such actions?

A: Again, the costs to individuals and governments associated with not taking action are increasingly known and large. The issue is whether governments and society accept that "market failure" has occurred, requiring direct intervention.

Q: What would be the appropriate information, program, and regulatory tools for government to employ?

A: There is little guidance based on historical roles of government to offer clear paths for action within Canadian societal norms. The way forward lies in unfamiliar territory.

Q: What role should industry play?

A: To some extent, industry is already ahead of government in a range of areas of strengthening food safety and environmental conduct beyond the minimum rules and guidance of governments and trade rules. These efforts have been in response to specific consumer concerns as well as potential liability limitation, over and above governmental regulation. Nonetheless, industry has a significant role to play in addition to governments in linking food, human health and environment.

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Endnotes

[1] Opening presentation at the conference: *What Are We Eating? Towards a Canadian Food Policy*, 15-17 February 2006, Montreal, Quebec.

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[2] This statement – or very similar wording – can be found as far back as the 1960s and in many policy reviews since that time and well into the 1980s.

[3] Mill, John Stuart. 1965. *Principles of Political Economy with Some of Their Applications to Social Philosophy. The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, volume III, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 800.

[4] See, for example, <http://www.disability.vic.gov.au/bhcv2/bhcArticles.nsf/pages/Cancer_and_food?OpenDocument>.

[5] The Policy Framework Agreement and the implementing agreements with provinces and territories are available at: <http://www.agr.gc.ca/cb/apf/index_e.php?section=info&page=frame>.