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From: The Chancellor
Date: 19 March 1996

PRIME MINISTER

BSE AND CJD

I have been brought up to date with developments on this issue, and I thought it might be helpful for you to have my views ahead of the meeting you are chairing this morning.

I am in absolutely no doubt that the Government should make public as rapidly as possible the full facts it has at its disposal. We have a duty to put the public fully in the picture so that everybody can take responsible and informed decisions. The immediate effect of the announcement will inevitably be a certain amount of hysteria in some sections of the Press and among some members of the public. But the Government have to tread a difficult line between giving reassurance on the one hand without being accused of complacency on the other. It is emphatically not the duty of Government to feed panic in the face of the short term outburst of a motion that is bound to take place.

We need to make a swift but calm assessment of the scale of the risk to public health. Any action which we take must be proportionate to that risk. We want to be in a position in 4 weeks time whereby intelligent people can look back and say that the Government's actions were measured and sensible, and not an absurd over-reaction which made things worse. I think with hindsight the

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behaviour of the Government following the salmonella and listeria crises - in which I was fully implicated - are widely seen to have been foolish and excessive, causing lasting damage to British agriculture.

In presenting the risk assessment, we need to find straightforward examples which people can readily understand. We should compare the risks of catching CJD with the risks of death from salmonella; blindness at birth from german measles; being struck by lightning; winning the jackpot on the National Lottery. No doubt colleagues can think of better examples.

We should also remind people that many die each year from the effects of smoking. But we do not plan to close down tobacco manufacturers. Indeed, we continue to defend the manufacturers' right to advertise!

I would regard a complete ban on beef products, or the culling of the beef and dairy herds, as completely over the top. Moreover, I suspect the general public would soon take a similar view, faced with endless media coverage of burning cattle piled high on funeral pyres.

Finally, I would like to emphasise that my position is not based simply on the potential public expenditure implications, though it is of course true that demands for compensation from farming and food manufacturing industries could be enormous, with significant implications for economic policy over the next 12 months. Rather, my position is based mainly on my view that the duty of Government is to give a responsible and calm lead to public opinion in the face of disturbing events.

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I hope you find this contribution helpful and that your meeting will reach constructive conclusions. I would be grateful if this minute could be copied to those attending the meeting.

Kenneth Clarke
Garden Rooms

From Kenneth Clarke

19 March 1996

[Dictated over the telephone by Nicholas Macpherson: 1045 am]

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