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NOTE FOR THE RECORD

BSE

The Prime Minister held a meeting on 18 March at the House of Commons with the Deputy Prime Minister, the Chief Secretary (HM Treasury), the Secretary of State for Health, and the Minister of State for Agriculture. Alex Allan, Howell James and John Ward (No.10) were also present. Both the Chief Secretary and the Deputy Prime Minister noted that they had relevant interests in the form of cattle herds.

The Minister for Agriculture noted that the meeting had before it the joint minute put forward by himself and the Secretary of State for Health of 18 March and in addition his own minute also of 18 March proposing a course of action. The Minister for Agriculture began by saying that the expert Scientific Advisory Committee (SEAC) had now formed the view on the basis of nine apparently new cases of Creutzfeldt Jacob Disease (CJD) that it was likely on the best evidence available that Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) might well be transmissible to humans. The Committee had formed the view that these particular nine cases of disease were likely to have been contracted in the period prior to the introduction of Specified Bovine Offals (SBOs) controls in 1989.

It was known to SEAC that SBO controls were ineffective given that small quantities of SBO material could be left behind in any slaughter house procedure. Hence if transmission to humans was possible via SBOs then present controls would not in all cases remove the risk. An audit of current slaughter house procedures would find traces of SBOs on carcasses.

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The Prime Minister said he was aware of the current scientific advice. But there was a huge leap from recognising the possibility of transmission to humans to the possible destruction of the entire beef herd and the destruction of the British beef industry which would go with it, coupled with huge national panic.

The Minister for Agriculture nevertheless took the view that it would not be possible to conceal such matters from the public. Once one admitted the possibility of transmissibility to humans, then one had equally to admit that controls were ineffective. Controls had been tightened in 1995 but those controls continued to be breached. The Prime Minister took the view nonetheless that the risk of contracting CJD was considerably less than the risk of contracting lung cancer for example, but the Government had not only failed to ban smoking, it had failed to ban even the advertising of smoking.

Nonetheless the meeting held that when conclusions were announced, there would be massive panic. The beef industry was damned at least in the short term, and possibly in the long term. It was likely that a statement could be extracted from SEAC which would say that while BSE was now thought to be transmissible, the proposals which the Minister for Agriculture was putting forward would minimise the risk. Nonetheless, scientific advice in the past had proved to be defective and we had no reason to believe that we could rely on this advice any more than any other. For this reason, the "Armageddon option" was unattractive since the Government would be in an equally impossible position however it acted.

In essence there were three possible options:

- i. Do nothing and await firm SEAC concl

96/03.19/17.2

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- ii. Stand firm on existing controls, recognising the short term crisis this would cause;
- iii. Accept that the beef industry was doomed and plan for total replacement of the herd.

To date scientific advice remained the view that milk and dairy products were safe.

Following the introduction of the SBO controls in 1989 and the further tightening of the controls in 1995, it was recognised that the cases of BSE had declined hugely. Although the full figure for contracted cases of CJD could not be known, there was no reason to assume that the same downward curve would not have taken place. This made the risk of contracting CJD infinitesimal despite the acceptance of transmissibility.

SEAC themselves were split on what action should be taken. Some were of the view that nothing should be done above and beyond the existing controls. Some were of the view that total eradication was the only answer. Others were of the view that the position the Minister of Agriculture was proposing would be acceptable. No doubt SEAC would produce a common position in due course, but given the differing views of some members of the committee, it might not be acceptable to rest on that.

There were other issues which would need to be addressed. For example, it might be necessary to ban the use of feed stuffs such as meat and bone meal to sheep and pigs to prohibit possible transmission. There was also a view that the way in which sheep were currently fed might mean that BSE had now been reintroduced into sheep flocks disguised as scrapie and that that itself was

96/03.19/17.3

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causing BSE transmission to the human population. That was a very speculative point at this stage.

As a counter balance it was likely that there were some cattle herds which remained unaffected by BSE. Perhaps some 40 per cent of dairy herds remained unaffected. There may in addition be some specialist beef herds which are unaffected. There was no "live test" which could be done. A "dead test" was possible, although not currently in all cases. It might be that it would be a cheaper option to provide a "dead testing facility" so that only safe carcasses were allowed for sale on the market. Whether that would be sufficient to restore confidence in either the domestic or the export beef market was open to question.

Beef sales per year were in the region of £2 billion. The slaughter of the beef herd over two and a half years old was likely to cost some £500 million per year in market support and a one-off cost of £1 billion in the withdrawal of existing food stocks. This represented a cost of some tens of million per life against a cost per life of £500 million for a road death in a cost benefit analysis. It was not guaranteed that a pragmatic cost benefit approach would prove a containable way forward.

What was clear was that a position of no announcement was unlikely to be sustainable. With this in mind, a Ministerial Meeting would be held on 19 March which would take the opportunity to seek advice from the Chief Medical Officer, the Chief Veterinary Officer and the Chairman of SEAC. In the light of this, the timing of a Statement to the House of Commons would be considered.

  
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96/03.19/17.4

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