

2021

## Feeding Britain: Our Food Problems and How to Fix Them

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### Recommended Citation

Caraher, Martin (2021) "Feeding Britain: Our Food Problems and How to Fix Them," *European Journal of Food Drink and Society*. Vol. 1: Iss. 2, Article 8.

Available at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/ejfds/vol1/iss2/8>

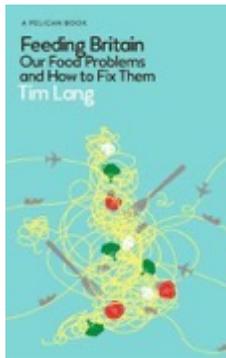
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## BOOK REVIEW

**Feeding Britain: Our Food Problems and How to Fix Them**, by Tim Lang, London: Pelican, Hardback 2020, 608pp., ISBN 9780241442227; Paperback 2021, 608pp., ISBN 9780241404805.



First off, a declaration of interest, I have known Tim for over 30 years and worked alongside him for that length of time. When he established the Centre for Food Policy in 1994, myself and David Barling worked with Tim as a team on food policy issues. I am mentioned in the acknowledgements at the back of both versions of the book under review; this gives me an insight into the ways that Tim operates. In the knowledge that bias can be positive as well as negative, I am in a position to provide an insight into the way Tim both works and thinks, while, unsurprisingly, not least to Tim, I am also not precluded from offering a critical perspective on some aspects of this book. That has been the nature of our friendship and academic relationship over 30 years.

The first edition of *Feeding Britain*, a hardback, was published in 2020 just prior to the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns and the full impacts of Brexit becoming clear. A paperback edition was issued in 2021 with a new preface; in this, Tim says: “Finalizing the book in February 2020, I wondered whether to hold it back, rewrite and edit to give a Covid-19 forward look. We decided not to. My reasoning was that any new shocks to the UK food system would surely exacerbate existing tensions rather than to create something entirely new. If my analysis was anywhere near correct, the dynamics and lock-ins would become apparent” (2021, p. xxx). In many ways, he is correct. COVID-19, Brexit, trade wars (which continue apace) and supply chain problems have merely made clear what is wrong with the food supply system, they have not caused these issues, but they have exposed many more people to problems such as food poverty and increases in obesity among young people. These problems were evident for quite some time and had long been building up to a crescendo. While the scale of the problems has been ramped up by the current tsunami of influences, the cause is deeper. For example, almost forgotten now in the light of COVID-19 are the 2000 UK fuel

blockades by protesters angry at the increases in fuel prices on the global market and the refusal by the British Government to reduce fuel duties (crude oil prices rose to £25 a barrel which would have resulted in at the pump prices of £4 a gallon). Supermarkets began rationing food due to difficulties in getting food deliveries to their shops, executives warning the Government that if the blockades continued, food supplies would run short within two to three days. This prompted the Government in the interim period to place the army on standby to transport food and medical supplies. Similar situations arose in 2007 and 2012. Despite these warning signs, no action was taken by successive governments. Tim's book sets out many such important touchstones of food policy history, or rather the lack of food policy historically, some of which have faded from memory. In the book, policy amnesia and the loss of institutional memory are both mentioned as blocks to progress in food policy. This really needs more attention and could have been dealt with in greater detail in the final chapter – “What We Ought to Do” and perhaps combined with and informed by Tim's vast experience of food policy under different political hues.

Some reviews of the book have complained about the detail and the depth of analysis, arguing for a more straightforward narrative and focussing on the recommendations. As an example, chapter 4 sets out 12 problems facing food policy and is 200+ pages long (197 to 411 in the paperback), while the references for the book run to 77 pages. This is for many, including students, a strength of the book; while the evidence base is clear it also reflects a core problem for food policy academics who constantly find themselves having to justify every sentence in the light of both industry and government attacks on that evidence base. For those old enough to remember encyclopaedias, this is an encyclopaedia of food policy in Britain. One of Tim's strengths is his policy prescience; in many ways what he is saying here is not that different from his analysis and predictions when he was the director of the then London Food Commission back in the 1980s (see interview at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b0080mb4>). His subsequent experience and analysis here brings this up-to-date, but the core message of a system not fit for purpose remains the clarion call for food policy advocates and politicians. In many ways, the presentation of data and statistics misses what Katherine Smith in her 2013 publication *Beyond Evidence-Based Policy in Public Health* calls “the war of ideas;” the food industry while calling into account the evidence of impact and outcome also relies on ideas of personal freedom and the role of the state in resisting choice. Industry strategies include reframing public health nutrition messages as issues of consumer rights and a debate over the role of the state in “nannying” or restricting people's choices. This war of ideas often hinges not on the facts but on who has the better story to tell and how they tell it. Tim's long experience in many different forums, from the NGO world to academia, could have shed more light on these battles.

The ability to look at data, to predict and to see trends is a key feature of this book and a careful reading is needed to disentangle and make clear these links. Both editions set out the issues for food policy in chapter 4; this breaks the problems for food policy into 12 areas ranging from “money flows” to “fraying food governance.” These twelve areas are complex and intertwined and require detailed reading; there is nothing wrong with this requirement although for the casual reader it can be difficult to unpack the issues on first reading. In fact, the book warrants two readings, one for the detail, and the other for the policy implications. As may be seen in works co-authored with David Barling in 2007 and Pamela Mason in 2017, Tim has both started and been subsequently involved in many of the key debates around food policy, ranging from the role of supermarkets to eco-nutrition. Some more of this personal experience and reflections on the processes of food policy would have been useful, perhaps in the last chapter (again see this interview for some of these details <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b0080mb4>). Mention is made of the new English food strategy and the potential this offers, albeit with some caveats. I am less optimistic about this. I am minded of what the Liberal politician, social reformer and economist W. H. Beveridge said of food policy as long ago as 1928 in his publication *British Food Control*. That in peace time there was no need for “food control,” and “As to lay and expert administration, the experience of the Ministry confirmed the view enshrined in the normal practice of the constitution, but occasionally forgotten during the War, that experts are bad masters, and that Ministers above all are best with no previous experience of the work they are to do.” Tim mentions the new food strategy for England, ironically called *National Food Strategy: The Plan*, compiled by Henry Dimbleby, a non-food policy expert and lead non-executive director at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. The problem here is not so much what is in the “Plan;” in fact there is little in it to disagree with, but the governance and management of food policy are less than clear. This reliance on outsiders to provide policy advice introduces a note of policy scepticism notably over the role of an industry representative Food and Drink Sector Council, which will be “a source of close advice and counsel.” Previous publications with my colleague Clare Punjwani highlight that we know from the previous Responsibility Deal that such engagement with industry is fraught with danger and requires careful management to keep public health targets on the table. This aspect of policy governance is, in many ways, not dealt with and does not draw on Tim’s considerable experience of policymaking; it could fit under his term “fraying governance.” The book is strong on what I call evidence for food policy but less clear on evidence of food policy implementation.

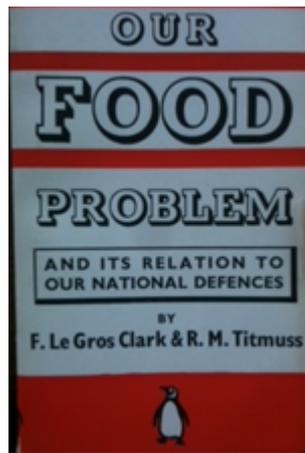


Figure 1: Front Cover of *Our Food Problem*

Tim starts the book with mention of a 1939 classic by Frederick Le Gros Clark and Richard Morris Titmuss *Our Food Problem* (figure 1) which produced a blueprint for a future food system. This vision became lost in the post-war boom and the flight from austerity. Tim and I share a huge admiration for this book and its vision, and in many ways *Feeding Britain* is the modern equivalent although coming in with a longer word count. The vision of Le Gros Clark and Titmuss was a food system that protected national food security and included health and well-being. The vested interests of the food industry often result in economic concerns dominating other concerns such as health, consumer rights, and the environment. Trade policy sees food as just another commodity and food production as just another business where the costs to human health can be balanced, as on a spreadsheet, against human and other costs. The impact of climate change, the food issues raised by COP26, and the COVID-19 crisis have all brought food policy back into focus and this book updates the blueprint proposed by Le Gros Clark and Titmuss to include the environment. This is where a focus on evidence of food policy implementation is necessary; we need to know what shifts the balance sheet and brings about successful food policy.

This book by Tim Lang certainly deserves a wide readership. As such, it could perhaps be read alongside his more recent commentaries on Brexit and COVID-19 food supply problems, many of which commentaries can be found on the Food research Collaboration website (<https://foodresearch.org.uk>). Tim's strength, the ability to predict policy developments, always has an underpinning basis of equity and food rights. The issue of the right to food and the dire situation that austerity as a policy in Britain introduced during the pandemic needs attention and challenging. How this can be achieved in the UK context is not clear.

While reading this book I was reminded of a book published and distributed during WWII to encourage discussion about food, rationing, and food supply. Written by Frank Wokes, the book was given out free at post offices, to encourage debate about food, and as can be seen from inside pages is a note of encouragement to leave it in

post offices so others especially “men and women in the services” could read it (see figure 2). My hope is that Tim can produce an equivalent, short version of his own book, which can and should be distributed to every household in the UK. Perhaps a suitable sponsor can be found, which will probably not be McDonalds.

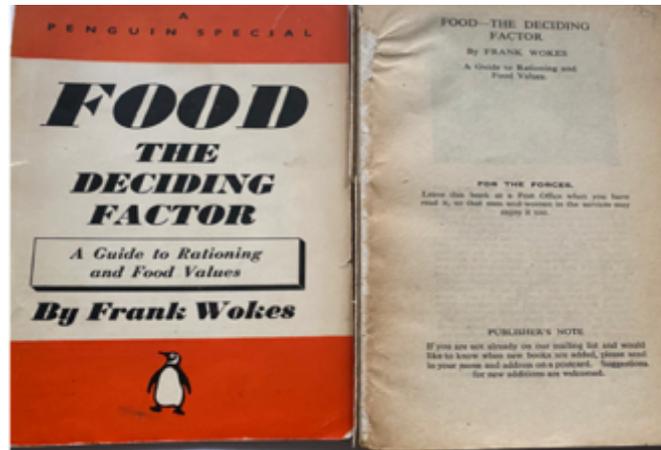


Figure 2: Front cover and fly sheet from *Food: The Deciding Factor*

This is an important book not just for those in the UK, but those in other countries wishing to learn about food and supply systems and potential ways to fix them. The United Kingdom along with the United States of America has a highly concentrated food system with a small number of big players controlling the supply chain, a nutrition system that is heavily reliant on consumption of ultra-processed foods, a food spend that is the second lowest in the world (averaging 11%) and a reliance on imports. There is a lot to be gleaned from this book to learn how not to end up with a dysfunctional food system. Buy it, read it and act on it.

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