

David Cameron: Why food matters

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“Over the last year I’ve tried to broaden our political debate.

People don’t always think about things in terms of government departments and the traditional political agenda.

So it’s important to talk about what really matters to people in their daily lives, about our society’s sense of general well-being.

That’s why I’m so pleased to have this opportunity today to talk about food.

How we produce it.

How we cook it.

How we eat it.

But above all about our attitude to food in this country.

I think it’s time for an honest debate about the culture of food in Britain, because it matters in so many different ways.

WHY FOOD MATTERS

Food matters to public health, with the impact of rising obesity on the NHS.

It matters in education, with the impact of sugary food and drink on children’s behaviour and attentiveness.

It matters in our family and community lives, as microwave ‘meals for one’ replace cooked meals around the table with family or friends.

It matters to our countryside, as small local producers struggle to compete with large multinationals.

And it matters greatly to the environment – not least because of the carbon emissions that come from air-freighting food around the world.

RESPECT FOR FOOD

So for all these reasons I think it's incredibly important for us to take food seriously.

But that's precisely the problem with the food culture in Britain today.

London may be home to some of the world's best restaurants, but as a nation we just don't respect food enough.

Too often, we treat it like fuel, shovelling any old food down, any time, any place, anywhere.

Instead of valuing fresh, quality food, carefully prepared, the kind of food culture you see in other European countries, we've created a junk food society.

Some people say that junk food is at least cheap food.

But in truth, it's a false economy.

There's a price to be paid for it – in our health, our environment, and our culture.

And in any case, it's simply not true to say that fresh, quality food is more expensive than pre-packaged, processed products.

But while it doesn't cost more money, it sometimes takes more time.

And I think it's important to make time for good food...

...which is why I'm so delighted to be celebrating the work of the Slow Food Movement today...

...and the inspirational leadership of Carlo.

You've shown that we have the power to take control of the food we eat, and change our food culture.

SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Because this is above all a cultural issue, it's not something that politicians can deal with just by passing laws and launching initiatives.

Food is not just a state responsibility – it’s a social responsibility.

So today I’d like to touch on some of the ways in which I think our society can do more to create a culture which respects food.

There’s a role for business, there’s a role for government – and perhaps most importantly, there’s a role for each of us as individuals.

BUSINESS

Big food businesses, whether producers or retailers, come in for a lot of criticism.

Marketing over-processed products, high in fat, salt and sugar, and low in real food content.

Insisting on blemish-free fruit and vegetables so that mountains of perfectly good produce are wasted.

Breaking the link between the food we eat and the natural world.

Of course, food businesses can argue that all they’re doing is meeting consumer demand.

That’s why consumer pressure is such a powerful force for change.

But food businesses have the opportunity, and, I would argue, the social responsibility, not just to follow, but to lead.

Many are already doing so, in imaginative ways, whether it’s Waitrose encouraging its customers to buy so-called “ugly” fruit and vegetables.

Bisto encouraging families to cook and eat a meal together one evening a week through its “Aah Night” marketing campaign or media companies like the Independent on Sunday with its Sunday Lunch campaign to encourage families to eat proper food together at least once a week.

I believe passionately that business can be a powerful force for good in tackling many of the biggest issues we face and that is certainly the case when it comes to food.

GOVERNMENT

But government has an important role to play too in shaping our food culture.

In our last election campaign, we promised to ensure honest labelling of food to support farmers' markets and local food projects and to insist that all publicly procured food carries the Little Red Tractor Mark that stands for British food with high animal welfare and production standards.

But for me, this is just the start.

Our Policy Review will be looking in detail at a number of important areas connected with our food culture.

Addressing the severe problem of access to fresh, healthy, high quality food in many neighbourhoods.

Examining what more can be done to follow through on Jamie Oliver's magnificent campaign on school food.

Investigating ways to improve cooking skills, knowledge of food and the basic principles of nutrition.

And considering any further measures necessary to control the marketing of food to children not just television advertising, but texts, promotions and sponsorship.

Perhaps to some people's surprise, the Conservative Party conference this year voted for further restrictions on marketing to children.

It's an interesting sign of how attitudes are changing.

INDIVIDUALS

And in the end, that is what will bring about lasting cultural change – individual attitudes and behaviour.

Our social responsibility is also our personal responsibility.

Taking time to appreciate food.

Buying food locally to support small shops and suppliers.

Cooking and preparing proper meals.

However busy we are, wherever we live and whatever our income, it's possible to do some of these things, some of the time.

Food is one of the great pleasures in my life, and I always try to make time for it.

I grow vegetables.

I try to buy good food.

And I always cook Sunday lunch for my family and friends.

None of us is perfect, and I won't pretend that my family and I don't cave in to the temptations of junk food every now and again.

But all of us have a part to play in helping to turn our junk food society into a good food society.

It's ironic that some of the worst aspects of our food culture come from advances in technology that have helped transform our world for the better.

But technology should be the servant of humanity – not our master.

Technological progress gives us the opportunity to remove those aspects of life that are painful and difficult and to create greater opportunities for leisure.

To focus less on economic survival and more on the quality of our lives.

To put it another way, less on GDP and more on GWB – our general well-being.

To do that we need time.

Yet, despite growing prosperity, many of us seem to lack time in our own lives, time for ourselves, time for family, time for community. __And so much of the destruction that we wreak on the environment is because of man's desire to find more time. __More speed. __More labour-saving. __More money-making, to afford more ways of beating the clock and conserving our energy for the things that matter. __Sadly it doesn't always work. __We're so busy saving time that we often don't get round to using it for the good things in life.

It's time to change that.

Let's teach the next generation some of the things that this generation has forgotten.

If we do, we'll be investing in the future well-being of our society in a way that will pay great dividends for decades to come.

And if we can all make a contribution to improving our food culture if we can all encourage each other to respect food more then we'll be doing our society a massive favour.”