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Presidential Address 2001

What is wrong with the affluent, well-fed, educated society in which we live and work?

G.K. BARRELL

The business of food production from animals, its attendant research and technology transfer industries, and science in general are all under attack from various factions within society. Generally, we see various causes come and - like fashions - go, but recently there has been an emergence of a number of attitudinal trends that seem to be 'ganging up' on the animal production sector. These appear to be increasing in number and intensity. It is as if the observation that "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark." – so bluntly voiced by Marcellus in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* - could apply to some countries in the modern world, New Zealand included. As members of a society of animal production, we owe it to the livestock industry to counter these negative trends.

Part of the problem arises from affluence itself. As societies gain in material wealth, there is a general shift away from rural/agrarian communities and towards increasing urbanisation, to the point of alienation from the food-producing sector. Another cause of attitudinal shift is the cheapness of food. In affluent societies, the cost of food is such a minor item in the daily budget that we see more obesity, with its attendant health problems, plus a loss of recognition of the worth to society of the food production sector, i.e. a loss of status. The expectation that food should be very cheap is a major driving force behind the disappearance of the family farm, hedgerows and rural communities, and the emergence of 'mega' farms such as some of the large-scale visual deserts called 'arable farms' or 'dairy conversions'. Furthermore, society today is generally better educated than ever before, but this too is questionable. Rather than an improvement in wisdom, we seem to encounter a higher degree of shrillness and a lot of well-articulated but badly reasoned diatribe, especially in matters related to food quality and environmental conservation. Better education has not necessarily increased intellectual acuity. Let me raise some specific concerns.

Perception of science

Science is currently perceived lowly as a career option for school leavers. This is especially so in the animal production sector where the image of old, grey-haired scientists is partly reinforced by the fact that some of are! Science appears to be getting an hostile press. We are blamed repeatedly for thalidomide. Hormones are seen generally to be an anathema, whether in meat or in the bodies of Olympic athletes. Few of the public, and they are not helped at all by the press, seem to have a realistic understanding of these substances. People with anti-science philosophies also tend to overlook their own reliance on technology to provide them with jet aeroplanes for international travel or for their fuel-injected, computer-controlled motor cars. The perception of animal research activity in any form, let alone as a career, is particularly low, except in those instances where it is stated that the

outcome will lead immediately to an improvement in human health or animal welfare. In New Zealand, I find it sobering to note that the public recognition of All Blacks is much higher than of Nobel prize winners. This attitude really helps place where the public perception of science stands in our culture.

Public ignorance

Part of the failing of the public to perceive science in a better light arises from ignorance. Much of this derives from the misplaced view that the media are providers of information. Of course, it may be in the best interests of the media to promote this view, as their main responsibility is to earn profits for their owners. They know too well that truth, reality and the rational views of informed spokespeople do not make newsworthy, hence marketable, headlines. Sensational predictions of gloom and doom do. The result of media-driven misinformation is that many of the public have distorted concepts about such topics as hormones, radioactivity and the concept of risk – just to name a few. I am aware of the widespread misconceptions people have about what academics actually do, how the tides and seasons of the year are generated, and how unlikely it is to be attacked by a shark. The media are too willing to publicise the shrill views of the uninformed and the irrational because such persons are entertaining or make highly provocative statements. Unfortunately, the audience is rarely provided with information on which to judge the credibility of such utterances.

Biosecurity risks

New Zealand in general and the animal production sector in particular face a genuine risk from biological invaders. Currently this has had much reinforcement from the outbreaks of bovine spongiform encephalopathy and foot-and-mouth disease overseas and the occurrence of varroa mite and occasional live snakes here. This country has some protection from its comparative isolation – an 'island paradise' – but the need to maintain our biosecurity can never be relaxed. Currently, there is an enormous effort going on and a surprisingly high number of interceptions has been recorded.

The Dark Ages have returned

In my youth, I learned that we were fortunate to live in enlightened times (the 20th Century) whereas the Dark Ages was a distant period of mediaeval history when ignorance and illiteracy prevailed and when superstition and practices such as witchcraft and ritual sacrifice were vogue. Thus today, I am appalled by the flourishing commerce in naturopathy, homeopathy, nutraceuticals, 'health' food shops, horoscopes, water divining, 'organics', zealotry, 'alternative' education and many other profitable activities or fashionable philosophies

which, in my opinion, have little or no rational basis. Just to pick one example – it should be noted that the major driving force for modern medicine was the fact that the traditional medical treatments did not work too well. So, it really does beg the question – Why are we returning to traditional medicine?

Global warming – Really?

I am comfortable in admitting that I am not convinced that there is a global warming event taking place. At any rate, not one that is any more than a natural oscillation in global temperatures as the Earth cools down from its initial fiery state, and certainly not one due to the activities of humans or their food- and fibre-producing ruminant livestock. It seems to be just another vogue topic in keeping with others such as nuclear winter, acid rain, ozone hole, greenhouse gases, melting of polar ice caps, rising sea level. Some of these have come and gone, others hang on, but in all cases they seem to be whipped along by hysteria and an all too prevalent Domesday wish. If one does take the trouble to look at the evidence, it turns out to be not strong for either side of the debate. A reasonable conclusion would have to be that – ‘the jury is still out on these issues’. However, my main concern arises from a couple of disturbing elements in this debate. One of these is the statement along the lines ‘...the vast majority of scientists believe it, so it must be true.’ Not only is this a very circular argument, it is not even factual. Secondly, the leading international scientific journals seem to be trading on their reputations to maintain sales, rather than being the totally impartial. These journals publish very few papers that report negative findings, i.e. ‘the sea level is not rising’, but seem to be overly susceptible to reporting findings that support the dire consequences for the studies of the environment.

Food quality/safety

No topic raises more fear mongering and lack of balanced reasoning than that of food quality and safety. As a child I was subjected to weekly changes in the family food menu as items were added or deleted according to whether they had been reported, respectively, as ‘health promoting’ or ‘cancer causing’. An excellent example, margarine, was presented to this society last year (Campbell & Fitzgerald, 2000). Here was a food stigmatised as potentially harmful for over 60 years before becoming ‘modern’ and acceptable in the 1950s. It is now on the table in most ‘health conscious’ homes, despite recent evidence that it may actually contain harmful compounds. However, I am concerned most generally with the widely broadcast idea that so-called ‘natural’ or ‘organic’ foods are of higher food quality and safer than other (?) foods. Such views are put forward with usually no justification whatsoever, yet are readily snapped up by all-too-eager consumers along with encouragement from some politicians and entrepreneurs. Why is so much alarm raised about possible carcinogens in food by people who eat toasted bread? Presumably this must be a selective irrationality. Why is there so much negativism about dairy products and animal fats – both excellent nutrients?

What can we do?

We can do four things. Promote science itself, educate the general public, manipulate the media, and lobby the management.

For the former there needs to be an improvement in career prospects for school leavers interested in science. Key changes could include better salaries and longer-term funding of research projects and teams. In this country, simply relying on market forces to address vocational supply/demand issues does not appear to be enough – we have to instigate a mindshift in the thinking of politicians and industry leaders by being proactive in promoting our sector of society. We have to learn to use (and understand) the media – hence the contract session at this conference. There have been ‘good news’ stories from science, e.g. Dolly, Viagra, Inverdale sheep, and quality images derived from technology, e.g. New Zealand mussels, Swiss watches, Ferraris. There must be many more.

We must encourage all people to question information from any source, rather than blindly accept whatever they are told. We can continue to point out the relevance of livestock production to the economy of this country and the benefits of technology to the quality of life in general. Importantly, I wish more people will learn to recognise that the popular media are not the valid sources of information on many topics.

To manipulate the media, scientists should get into the habit of generating news releases. To promote science through the media, especially television, we need to identify those members of the scientific community who are larger-than-life, entertaining, youthful and photogenic, and offer them as ‘front people’ for such tasks.

As for lobbying the management, it is our responsibility to become political. We need to respond to the challenges that society is placing on our industry and we do this best by keeping key politicians and leaders of business properly informed.

Finally

My advice is – don’t be pessimistic. We have our individual capacities to counter the concerns I have raised here and it is reasonable to expect each one of us to do ‘our bit’.

REFERENCE

- Campbell, H.; Fitzgerald, R. 2000. New Zealand’s food exports in the 21st century: whither the green option? *Proceedings of the New Zealand Society of Animal Production* 60: 72-77