Food to the fore

ONE of the most striking political developments in 2008 was a shift in the Government’s stance on food security. In the space of a few months it has moved from a position bordering on complacency to one of outright concern. The first clear signs that this was happening came in July, when the Cabinet Office published a report entitled ‘Food matters: towards a strategy for the 21st century’, which discussed food issues in the UK in a global context, and again a few weeks later when Defra produced a related discussion paper, ‘Ensuring the UK’s food security in a changing world’. Both were substantial documents, and both took a much less sanguine view of the future than the Government had taken previously (see VR, September 27, 2008, vol 163, p 373). More recently, Hilary Benn, the Secretary of State at Defra, gave a lecture on ‘the politics of food’ to the Fabian Society in London last month. As well as being interesting in its own right, this provided a further indication of how much the Government’s thinking has changed.

In his lecture, Mr Benn placed the issue of food availability firmly in an international context, highlighting current inequalities between rich and poor countries and the scale of the challenges ahead. ‘Just as the 20th century was marked by the search for oil, so the 21st will be defined by the search for food and water. By 2050 there will be nine billion of us living on this small and fragile planet. And the question is: do we have the capacity to feed the equivalent of another two Chinas? Global food production will need to double by the middle of the century just to meet demand. We have the knowledge and the technology to do this, as things stand, but the perfect storm of climate change, environmental degradation and water and oil scarcity, threatens our ability to succeed.’

Climate change represented the most serious threat to food production and could result in ‘hundreds of millions more people going hungry’. Beyond a certain increase in temperature, crop yields and the availability of water would start to decline and, he said, ‘that’s when having enough food could stop being a question of distribution and access and start becoming a scramble for what’s available’. Mr Benn did not believe that simply ‘pulling up the drawbridge’ and hoping that the UK could produce enough food to sustain itself would provide the answer, although he acknowledged that domestic food production was ‘ hugely important’. Rather, he argued, the UK should look to maintaining the security of its sources of supply – and that meant helping to create a stable food market that could meet global demand for future generations.

Describing this as ‘both a moral duty and an investment in our future security’, Mr Benn said there was a need to work with developing countries to significantly and sustainably raise their agricultural productivity, and to invest more in agriculture, research and irrigation. There was a need to deal with the problem of inequality, which meant tackling poverty, and also for a fairer trading system, free of ‘escalating tariffs’. In addition, there was a need to change the way food was produced. It would be necessary to produce more food on less land per person but, he said, ‘We cannot simply focus on yields. We need to balance the amount we produce against long-term sustainability of production . . . If food production is not sustainable as the century unfolds, it will never be secure. Increasing production and protecting the environment are not in competition with each other; those who suggest they are, just haven’t got it.’

Concluding, Mr Benn remarked that the world needed to face up to the twin challenges of food production and climate change. Reaching agreement on climate change would be vital, but even this wouldn’t be enough to deal with all of the problems associated with food supply and, he said, a new global approach was needed. ‘We need to look at how we can build on the work of the World Food Programme, the Food and Agriculture Organization and others to create a kind of new Kyoto – a global agreement to secure the future of our food.’

Disappointingly, there was no mention of livestock production in Mr Benn’s lecture, or of the importance of tackling animal diseases. Similarly, there was little discussion of how the principles outlined in his talk might be applied by the UK. Nevertheless, there were some fine sentiments in his address to the Fabian Society. The challenge, as always, will be to translate those sentiments into effective action.

The full text of Mr Benn’s speech to the Fabian Society can be found at www.defra.gov.uk/corporate/ministers/speeches/hilary-benn/hb081210.htm