New Blackfriars

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Comment: *Chlorinated Chicken*

Would you eat it, knowingly? Americans do, they say, in their millions. When the British electorate voted on 23 June 2016 in favour of leaving the European Union, by 51.9% to 48.1% on a turn out of 71.8%, few of us, whichever side we were on, can have considered eating chicken imported from the USA. Nor did many of us consider everyday life in Gibraltar, let alone border control between Northern Ireland and the Republic. By mid-July 2017, however, the implications began to emerge: the restoration of British independence and the freedom to enter into international trade deals without regard to regulations prescribed by foreigners in Brussels, will mean negotiating thousands of decisions over details such as whether we too may happily eat chlorine-rinsed chicken. 'Brexit means Brexit' began to acquire some content.

For myself, chicken would never be my choice. My great aunt Charlotte, widowed young when her husband died of lung disease, came to live with her married sister, my grandmother, on their small farm in the northeast lowlands of Scotland, where she took over the kitchen. This freed my grandmother to run the place while my grandfather disappeared to work on their neighbours' machinery, retooling tractors, binders and suchlike, much more congenial to him than servicing animals or getting things to grow. Aunt Charlotte's weekly specialty was a boiled hen, killed in the yard by my grandmother — a tasteless dish, I always found, eating which has put me off chicken for life; but, on a family farm all those decades ago, it was a natural domestic operation, requiring no regulation unless implicitly by common sense.

According to Liam Fox, the UK trade secretary, a Glasgow-trained general practitioner before entering politics, 'raised in a Catholic of Irish heritage family in East Kilbride', so Wikipedia records, the British market should be open to importing chlorinated poultry, banned by the EU indeed, but freely available in the grand deal with the US that President Trump has promised and to which Brexiteers look forward with glee.

Why are dead birds chlorine-washed in the US? — To clean them of bacteria and other contaminants. The process is too disgusting to describe. Animal welfare people, however, effective in Brussels, assert that it only disguises the real problem, which is rearing and slaughtering animals in dirty and insanitary conditions. They even claim that chlorination does not stop contamination, unwanted germs

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continue to flourish and can mutate into more virulent forms, ultimately posing a greater danger to human health.

On the other hand, Michael Gove, secretary of state for the environment, formerly a journalist, brought up in Aberdeen, son of a fish processing merchant, when given chlorine-rinsed chicken as an example of a 'product' that does not meet EU standards, and asked if it should be allowed in the British market, immediately said 'No' – adding, bombastically, that, as we leave the European Union, we need to be 'leaders in environmental and in animal welfare standards'.

Despite this disagreement with Dr Fox, Mr Gove insisted that the UK government was united on the need not to 'dilute our high animal welfare standards or our high environmental standards in pursuit of any trade deal' — conceding that 'The trade secretary quite rightly pointed out that, of course, this issue is important. But we mustn't concentrate on this one issue when we look at the huge potential that a trade deal can bring'. Of course chicken should not obsess us but, in returning us to the global vision, Mr Gove runs the risk of allowing us to overlook how many specific decisions will have to be negotiated.

Questions about food standards protection deserve and command a great deal of attention in international trade negotiations — one reason why they take years to conclude. A trade deal with the US would obviously include agriculture. Dr Fox has been criticised by Gianni Pittella, who heads the socialist group in the European parliament (surprise surprise!), deploring his 'indigestible' suggestion, which would lead the EU towards introducing controls on chicken imported from the UK, whether or not originally from the USA. The EU, in that dictatorial bureaucratic manner that the British people voted to reject (by 51.9%, as noted), bans the practice lest abattoirs might come to rely on it as a decontaminant, or because unscrupulous producers could use it to make meat appear fresher.

Moves to lift the ban would also be opposed by British poultry farmers because American chicken, significantly cheaper than the UK's, might put them out of business. But surely no negotiators would be willing to abandon our poultry farmers in favour of cheap US imports that do not meet our sanitary or animal welfare standards, independently of EU regulations?

Anyway, chlorinated chicken is only the first to make the headlines of thousands of issues that will have to be negotiated, legal, industrial, medical, academic, military and much else, as well as agricultural — as Brexit actually happens.

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