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Brexit risks creating a dangerous two tier food system between rich and poor, warns a major new report

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A no deal Brexit risks creating a dangerous two tier food system that divides the rich and the poor, with the less well-off forced to accept lower standards, warns a major new report from a leading UK think-tank.

The think tank, ResPublica, hopes its report will act as a wakeup call to the Government, which it says has done little to prepare, or protect Britain's £7.2billion poultry industry.

In the report *Coming Home to Roost: The British Poultry Industry After Brexit*, the think-tank sets out three scenarios: "Evolution" (retaining the status quo), "Trade Liberalisation" (which would see tariffs removed) and "Fortress UK", where WTO trade tariffs would be imposed on products from the EU.

The report, sponsored by the British Poultry Council, identifies the main economic, societal and environmental risks to the poultry meat industry in the event of three potential Brexit scenarios. The report aims to keep the Government as well informed as possible, so they can mitigate future risks by negotiating a trade relationship with the EU that provides the best protection for producers and consumers.

At present, the UK is the fourth-largest poultry meat producer in the EU, and it is about 60 per cent self-sufficient. The carcass balance, or import-export balance, with the EU is an important issue for the poultry meat industry with regard to Brexit. UK consumers prefer to eat breast meat, rather than dark cuts like wings, legs and thighs, which means that UK producers have to export surplus dark meat to maximise revenue. The profitability of the sector therefore revolves around finding a market for 75 per cent of the bird that is left over after removing the breasts. Approximately 70 per cent of our dark meat exports are to the EU, and the majority of the poultry meat that is imported

into the UK comes from the European Union. Maintaining the future relationship is therefore key to the sector.”

Phillip Blond, Director of ResPublica commented: “Regardless of the merits, or otherwise of leaving the EU. this report exposes the risks should the Government fail to secure a good deal. As part of this process they must work closely with an industry that employs nearly 87,700 people and whose products can be found in the majority of our homes and restaurants.

“Despite considerable rhetoric the country seems to be marching towards a no deal Brexit, without even the most basic contingencies in place to ensure certainty of supply on the most basic of items such as chicken.”

The report goes on to argue that a deal which maintains the status quo would best protect the consumer, due to shared welfare, environmental and sustainability standards, but in the event of ‘no deal’ there is a real danger of a reduction in food standards and affordability.

“The UK could increasingly become a country divided by its consumption of food. When the increased costs of production are passed on to consumers through higher prices, lower-income consumers may be left unable to afford fresh British chicken, instead having to rely on cheaper, lower standard meat imports from countries like Brazil and Thailand. This could create a two-tier food system, where only the wealthy can afford to eat fresh home-reared high standard chicken....”

It continues: “It is reported that senior Government advisors have made plans to ‘suspend food controls if there are any delays to imports of perishable foods at our borders’. This cannot be allowed to happen. The Government must work with policymakers to create a ‘clause’ that ensures all future imports meet UK standards...”

Of particular concern for the think-tank is what might happen to standards should the UK turn to non-EU countries for their poultry meat. They worry about chlorinated chicken from the US and inferior standards of production in other countries, which British consumers are unwilling to accept.

“... In particular, it is a legal requirement in the US to wash or spray poultry carcasses with chlorine dioxide before being offered for sale, to reduce bacterial contamination. This process was banned in the EU in 1997 due to concerns surrounding hygiene and the fact it would go against the ‘farm to fork’ model prized by British consumers .” it says.

The WHO has highlighted widespread and continued use of antibiotics in countries like Thailand, while in the UK overall antibiotic use fell by 82 per cent between 2012-17.

Joe Cowen, who authored the report added: “Antibiotic use is endemic in Thailand, while Brazil, another major exporter of chicken has significantly lower standard than the UK. Recently we saw 20 factories shut down over night, due to poor practices.

Crashing out of the EU without a deal, means we would lose much of the EU external infrastructure that allows us to monitor and inspect the food we eat and how it is prepared.

“While its possible to construct our own regulatory system, given the glacial pace of the Government around all elements of Brexit, it seems unlikely that this would happen before we are due to leave next March, exposing consumers to food produced to lower standards.”

ResPublica warns that under a “Fortress UK” or ‘no deal’ scenario, labour costs in the sector could rise by up to a half as the industry is heavily reliant on skilled EU workers.

Blond continues: “If the Government is serious about making Brexit work, then it is essential that the UK finds a workable trade deal with our EU partners. If it fails then we risk creating a dangerous two tier system, where the rich will be able to afford the increased cost of production necessary to maintain the highest standard, while those on low incomes will have little choice, but to accept poultry with inferior standards, such as chlorinated or from countries where the use of antibiotics is unregulated and unmonitored.”

The report concludes by urging the Government to do more to support the industry, such as encouraging schools and hospitals to promote higher standards by buying British poultry. It also urges the Government to help educate consumers to eat the “whole carcass” as currently consumers prefer white meat, which accounts for just a quarter of the available meat on a bird.

The British Poultry Council has warned that Brexit poses unprecedented economic, social and environmental challenges to British food production and supply.

British Poultry Council, Chief Executive, Richard Griffiths, said:

“Food is a special case, it should be treated as a national security issue, and be protected as such. Government must ensure that British food, and the quality it represents, stays affordable and available for all. If we cannot support our own production, then there will emerge a two-tier food system with the average citizen forced to rely on lower standard imports.

“As the UK’s largest livestock sector, we are keen to work together with Government to help solve the conundrum of frictionless trade with Europe, be that on regulatory alignment, the use of technology to facilitate crossing of borders, or the future of where labour is going to come from.

“We are calling on the Government to develop a robust transition plan to ensure we have access to the workers we need and to avoid any disruption in the smooth movement of perishable products across the EU.”

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Notes to editors:**About ResPublica**

The ResPublica Trust (ResPublica) is an independent non-partisan think tank. Through our research, policy innovation and programmes, we seek to establish a new economic, social and cultural settlement. In order to heal the long-term rifts in our country, we aim to combat the concentration of wealth and power by distributing ownership and agency to all, and by re-instilling culture and virtue across our economy and society.

About the British Poultry Council

The British Poultry Council is the trade association for those involved in the production of poultry meat - chicken, turkey, duck, and goose – in the UK. Our member businesses account for nearly 90% of the production in this country and cover whole food chain: breeding hatching growing, slaughter, processing, and packing. British poultry meat farmers grow nearly a billion birds every year to standards that are among the best in the world. Facing Brexit, British food and confidence in British food producers is more important than ever. BPC members, who do not receive subsidy through the Common Agricultural Policy, are committed to producing safe, wholesome, and nutritious food for Britain.

The full report is available upon request.

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