



Laura Sandys MP: why food security must be viewed as a strategic threat

Laura Sandys

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With cheap food pricing, over-reliance on imports, and the pressures of a growing population, the UK's food security is set to rise up the national agenda. The Coalition Government must be prepared for the challenges ahead

For too long we have been avoiding one of the biggest threats to this country's domestic security – food. Deluded by cheap food prices, importing over 50 per cent of what is on our supermarket shelves, and dismissing the calls from UK farmers and fishermen to focus more on national food production; food insecurity is an issue set to rise up the national agenda. It is time that Government understood and prepared for the challenge ahead.

I am pleased that our Government scientists are taking the issue of food security seriously with the future launch of the Foresight Report on Global Food and Farming Futures. Following a 20 per cent drop in Britain's food self sufficiency over 10 years, the report will constitute an important and



Britain's food security needs urgent action, says Laura Sandys MP

timely step in addressing the threat to Britain's food security. Only last week, the UN's Food and Agricultural Organisation reported record food price hikes of 4.2 per cent - double the national wage increase.

Food is a truly globalised business – a fact which enhances Britain's vulnerability given its reliance on food imports. Events in recent weeks will undoubtedly be reflected in our pockets. Australia – the fourth largest producer of wheat – has lost tons of its crops in floods; conflict in the Ivory Coast has limited cocoa exports; and poor harvests due to La Nina have reduced global food supplies. Such events reflect in world food prices and result in greater unpredictability in securing food staples.

Trade protectionism

A new era of trade protectionism in food could well be on the horizon - not for economic gain, but to ensure domestic stability. Policy makers have perhaps lost sight of the domestic, regional and international tensions that could arise should access to food be curtailed. Only last week, the rising price of onions resulted in India banning exports to Pakistan which worsened tensions with its neighbour. On Friday, the world witnessed Tunisia's people overturn their President as a peak in global food prices contributed to national unrest. Whitehall must take heed of these international lessons and prepare

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But just how vulnerable is the UK, and how should we go about securing our future food supply? We must assess the risk – a risk that is growing and will only accelerate exponentially due to a global population reaching 9 billion by 2050. Further, over 25 per cent of the world's productive land will be lost due to rising sea levels and desertification. The government should halt development on grade one agricultural land – the means and resources for food production must be regarded as a national priority.

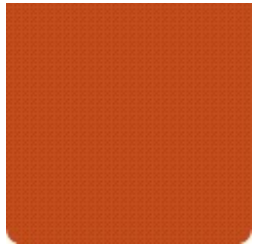
There is also a role for our defence capacity in safeguarding Britain's food security. Policy makers must carefully consider what threats might arise due to resource scarcity. Piracy is one. Last year alone, pirates abducted 217 merchant ships. Even the British Chamber of Shipping has stated: 'Climate change and scarcity of resources will bring unknown and destabilising influences at sea – as we all fight for vanishing resources.' Although it is presently the Horn of Africa that is blighted by pirates, if food is to become a more valued commodity and energy costs are to increase, piracy could soon plague other major trade routes.

Safeguarding supplies

Special Forces with specialist knowledge could provide logistical assistance to support our vessels transporting vital food supplies. Our aircraft carriers and frigates could assist Britain's food importing vessels by protecting from the threats of piracy and keeping trade routes open.

But some of the answers also lie closer to home. We must rethink the way we use food. I was recently part of a TV programme that highlighted that up to 30 per cent of food – good food – is thrown away every year. Supermarkets reject fruit and vegetables that do not fit their so called 'aesthetic standards'; sell by dates encourage us at home to throw away food that is perfectly fresh; and meat cuts such as offal are discarded as we have forgotten how to eat or cook them. In my constituency of Thanet, fishermen are compelled to discard 50 per cent of their catch due to an outmoded quota system.

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A further step towards greater food security is needed to develop and invest in world class food production technologies. Food production will - and must - become one of Britain's industries of the future. Schools must encourage the young to look at the food and agricultural sector as exciting and offering challenging futures, and universities must take steps to draw together the best brains and resources to address the challenge of dealing with food security.

Up until rationing was lifted after the war, food security was regarded as a strategic issue for Government. It is important that food inflation and scarcity are understood throughout Whitehall and that the warnings of our leading scientists are heard.

Laura Sandys is a Conservative MP for South Thanet

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