

Twenty-Seventh Annual Campden Lecture

**Creating the European  
Food Safety Authority**

by

**Geoffrey Podger**

**8th June 2005**



Campden & Chorleywood Food  
Research Association Group





## **Geoffrey Podger, CB**

Geoffrey Podger took up office as the first Executive Director of EFSA on 1st February 2003. He was appointed following an open competition throughout the European Union. Mr. Podger was previously Chief Executive of the UK Food Standards Agency, which was established in April 2000 to bring about increased transparency and consumer involvement in food safety and related matters.

Geoffrey Podger has been a UK civil servant since graduating from Oxford University in 1974. He has been mainly concerned with public health matters and has worked extensively for the Department of Health in London. He was awarded the CB in 2003.



# **Creating the European Food Safety Authority**

**by Geoffrey Podger, CB**

Executive Director, European Food Safety Authority

First of all, it is both a privilege and a pleasure to be asked to give this year's Campden Day lecture.

The good news that I can offer at the start is that I appreciate that a speech on "Creating the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA)" has potentially all the inherent interest of watching paint dry! Let me therefore reassure you that the title is merely a pretext for raising a number of hobbyhorses of mine: about the role of Scientific Committees, the interface between risk analysis and risk management and last, but not least, the role of the media. In tackling these issues I do propose to take account of my EFSA experience - not least as one of the advantages of living and working abroad is that it gives you the opportunity not merely to tap into a new culture but also to see one's own from a different stance. Hence you will inevitably get a slight "Home thoughts from abroad" perspective in what I am about to say.

## **The role of external scientists and external scientific committees**

EFSA is very similar to FSA UK in depending on external experts to resolve contentious scientific questions, usually through the use of a scientific committee or working group. Both the Board of EFSA and I have always insisted from the start on the prime criteria for participation being relevant academic excellence to the qualification sought and we have used the criterion of geographical representation only where the rival candidates were about equal in this regard. Interestingly the UK has on this basis around 15% of the membership of the Scientific Committee and Panels, which I think is a well-deserved tribute to the quality of food science in this country.

A rather fundamental issue for us is how to make best use of this expertise. EFSA finds itself with a large amount of routine work, which comes to us from Community legislation

together with a further burden of questions from a main client, the European Commission. In addition both the European Parliament and the Member States have the right to ask us questions. Whilst this right has so far been relatively infrequently used, it is likely to be invoked still further in the future. Nevertheless, although with our existing staff we could be fully occupied simply with these commissions, we, supported again by our Management Board, have chosen to use a significant part of our internal and external expertise on self-generated questions. We do this quite simply as a means of ensuring that real potential public health priorities do not get overlooked, to ensure that issues are addressed in a balanced way and also that issues which risk managers may be happy to keep “under wraps” can nevertheless be ventilated.

Some examples may serve to illustrate this point. We have quite deliberately chosen to take a critical look at the methodologies we use, e.g. the Biohazards Panel review of the GBR (Geographical BSE Risk) methodology or a number of technical issues in the pesticide area. Our GMO Panel, which has been the subject of unfair external criticism, to which I shall return, has quite deliberately taken on a number of “hot chestnuts” including “Post-marketing environmental monitoring of GMOs”, “Safety of antibiotic resistance markers” and “The use of animal feeding trials for the safety evaluation of GM whole food/feed”. The EFSA Scientific Committee has itself done much useful work in the area of “non-nutritional components in the EU diet” which ventures into the world of botanicals and the like. The Contaminants Panel did some comparable work on the risk from furan on the data emerging from North America. What all these issues have in common is that they are controversial, scientifically difficult and may lead to conclusions that are unpalatable to risk managers.

Probably of the three topics I intend to cover there is least difference in relation to scientific committees between that of EFSA and the situation we are used to in the UK. It is however rather amusing to note that whereas the UK has consumers on its scientific panels as lay members, this is stoutly resisted elsewhere in Europe, not least by the representatives of EU consumers themselves, who believe it would be interfering with the science. Interestingly also EFSA scientific committees, like other EU Scientific Committees, are wholly open about their findings but their discussions are, and remain, confidential to the participants. I must confess that in this last respect I see some advantage in the EU model in that we have a clear position of having public discussions with stakeholders but reaching scientific conclusions after private discussions. It does seem to me that this is rather more clear-cut than a system in which some parts of the discussion are held in public and others (e.g. on unpublished papers) are held in private. It also allows the experts to have a good argument without the undoubted effect of public or media commentary. Hence I think we would be reluctant to change from this procedure.

In concluding this part of my remarks, I think I should however point to a shared problem. The whole system of external expert independent panels is crucially dependent on the good will of the members. Whilst we hope that the intellectual challenge and value of the work and indeed of their fellow members constitutes some reward, we have to ask how much longer we will be able to have access to high quality experts given the ever tightening requirements of their “day jobs” in predominantly academic institutions. Also, as we have seen with the EFSA GMO Panel, it is all too easy for those who feel passionately opposed to a particular issue, to begin to attack the personal integrity of those engaged in the production of scientific advice. It is of course right that we should all be subject to criticism and the EFSA Management Board has made a full and public response to the criticisms in this case, making clear that they were without justification. Nevertheless the numbers of experts who will wish to continue to put their heads above the parapet faced with potential “politicized” personal attacks is in my view something which should concern us. We also, I think, have to make clear to those who engage in such attacks, that they will inevitably and properly cease to be regarded as proper interlocutors on the scientific level. Hence my conclusion is that whilst public authorities have good reason to be grateful to their external scientific experts, we should not be too confident that the system will survive without further support in all senses, to our experts. It follows also that there is a real responsibility on those who wish to engage in a meaningful debate with public authorities to accept that both sides take on responsibility towards the other in terms of mutual respect. Stakeholders, as much as bodies like EFSA, have to be prepared to listen to the other parties’ views and accept that views with which they disagree may nevertheless be sincerely held. Otherwise the very considerable steps made towards openness and engagement in recent years will not be maintained and each side will retreat back into the ghetto of non-comprehension.

## **Risk Assessment and Risk Management**

An area where EFSA operates wholly differently from the UK model is that we are responsible for risk assessment, communication of that assessment but not for risk management. EFSA is therefore more like the Central Continental model of France and Germany than the UK model which is however found in many other EU countries (Greece, Ireland, Spain, Sweden for example). I am often asked, having worked in both systems, which I think is actually preferable and it is that issue which I should like now to explore.

In a sense, rather like life in general, the choice you make brings both advantages and disadvantages! The clear advantage is that an independent risk analysis authority is less likely to be affected by “political” pressures whether with a small “p” or large “P”. These pressures are not just those of seeking to minimize potential risk so as, to use that hallowed

phrase, “not to alarm the public”. They may often be because a problem does not admit of a perfect solution and it is more convenient to the risk manager that attention should be diverted from loose ends. Even more curiously - and perversely - it may often suit a risk manager to exaggerate a problem since otherwise it will be necessary to disabuse the “worried well” or those who make a living out of tackling the risk that actually a lower level of remedial action is justified. It is indeed a strange feature of our society that the less real concerns people have, the more at least some parts of society seem to have a need to invent insecurities. This is in no sense a problem confined to the UK. A recent Italian poll, for example, showed that the major issue of “futuresology” about which Italians were worried (33.3%) was the exhaustion of potable water, which they gave preference to over natural calamities (22.4%), nuclear incidents (18.2%), viruses (19.3%) and population growth (7.7%). The highest level of concern was amongst educated young people in North Italy: which is interesting as to the extent Italy has water supply and distribution problems, they are concentrated in the South and in the Islands.

We in EFSA have always seen it as our function to report risk as objectively and as accurately as we can, which may often mean producing conclusions that challenge conventional wisdom. Thus the recent Scientific Committee report on the evaluation of genotoxins and carcinogens, which is currently out for consultation, does suggest that at very low levels their removal may not be of high priority for risk managers. In the meat inspection area, which in my UK experience is not exactly short of vested interests, EFSA has issued a number of reports suggesting that current inspection methods may not be the best for protecting human health and indeed that some techniques may even increase the risk.

So far then, so good. The difficult part is that neither politicians nor public wish to be forced to respond to risk analyses which give rise to some kinds of concern, without knowing at the same time of the risk management strategy. In other words if EFSA simply made autonomous announcements of new and significant risks we would inevitably create possibly unjustified levels of public alarm because we had answered the questions “what is the risk” but not the related questions “what should I personally/my family do about it” and “what, if anything, are the public authorities going to do?”.

Hence a credible risk communication strategy requires that the risk assessors and the risk managers act in tandem. We may decide, as with EFSA, to pull apart risk analysis from risk management, but ultimately the two have to be put together again. Fortunately this process is helped by the fact that the Commission, who are the risk managers, are present as observers at scientific committee and panel meetings and can focus on the issues which are likely to emerge. The process remains however rather tricky for both parties as we certainly do believe we have a responsibility to consumers to explain what their personal response to



our advice might be on the basis of the advice of our scientific experts. This has led to at least one well-advertised disagreement with the Commission but hopefully for the future we shall be able to work more harmoniously together. It is also worth noting in this context that information needed to advise the EU consumer on risk may not be available at EU level at all. This of course reflects the all-important need for consumption data to calculate exposure. The EU is certainly not harmonious in its food consumption patterns as the following few figures will illustrate. For example consumption of olive oil per year and per person ranges from 23.11 litres in Greece to 1.23 in France with the UK off the scale. Hence a problem with olive oil EU wide would have very different implications for individual Member States and their national food authorities would need to be able to make an individual risk assessment.

The answer therefore to the issue of whether risk assessment is better combined or not with risk management is therefore a mixed one. At least in theory separation should provide a higher degree of objectivity and a certain willingness “to think the unthinkable”. Conversely separation risks conflicts of advice and difficulties over consistency of advice between risk assessors and risk managers. The argument continues.

It is also linked to another rather tricky argument that straddles the boundary between risk assessment and risk management, namely should peoples’ emotional perception of risk be counted as part of risk assessment or risk management. In fairness I should mention the third possibility that neither risk assessors nor risk managers should pay attention to this point.

The last point may seem something of an absurdity but has to be taken seriously. In an all-rational universe people presumably would take the view that risks should be quantified, a barrier of acceptable risk set, and this used as the dividing line between what is to be allowed and what not. As a rather eminent person in the UK once said to me (and that is not code for anyone in this conference room!) if people accept the risk of smoking, should not the same level of risk apply to food? Of course there is the obvious rejoinder that smoking is a voluntary rather than an involuntary act (unless of course it is passive smoking) and that nobody seriously questions that cigarettes would ever have been permitted for sale if the real level of risk had been understood at the outset. In the event I think I confined myself to remarking that on this basis the whole of EU food law would have to be rethought as it clearly implies that infinitely lower levels of risk are not to be regarded as acceptable - a conclusion with which personally I very much agree. I am not sure my interlocutor was much convinced.

What is for sure is that people do have very different levels of perception of risk for food as opposed to other activities in life, and certainly as far as food is concerned perceptions vary

both in time and by geography. The different view of risk in relation to food as opposed to other substances is perhaps best illustrated by the anecdote I was told in London last week of the person they observed in a shop obtaining a refund for a product contaminated by Sudan 1 and then spending the money on - wait for it - a packet of cigarettes. Perhaps the “eminent person” was right after all!

Geographical variation in the perception of risk is also clearly to be seen in the EU. Cultural habits clearly outweigh other factors as for example in the North European distrust of the safety of food bought in markets; only 10% Denmark, 9% UK and 7% Ireland agree that “safest products are to be found in markets” whilst the comparative figures for Luxembourg, France and Spain are 46%, 40% and 36% respectively. As we have seen sadly in the UK, episodes like BSE can erode confidence in food safety to seemingly very low levels yet opinion can recover, with the UK now securing very high levels of consumer confidence (e.g. the outcome of the recent “Trust in Food” survey).

All that said, my personal view is still that we should in risk assessment stick to the science and keep risk perception, like the cost impact of potential measures, as matters to be considered by risk managers. Otherwise it seems to me we rule out *ab initio* something we should want to encourage, namely that the Society might be prepared to change its view of a risk in the light of the known facts. If we do not accept this possibility what are we all here for?

### **The Media and Food Safety Issues**

The final issue on which I wanted to touch today is that of the media and food safety. Here, indeed, the European Union is at its most diverse! And, moreover, the UK in my experience is definitively an “outlier”. Indeed precisely this point was well made to me by a consultancy firm who were organizing an event at which I was due to speak elsewhere in the EU. “Mr. Podger”, they rather sweetly asked me “do you have any experience of dealing with the media?”. With as straight a face as possible, I admitted to some experience with the UK media. “That’s OK, then”, said the consultant, adding as an afterthought, “it certainly won’t be that bad!”.

In fact there is something very curious about the way the UK media deals with food safety issues. Partly, no doubt, because of the very serious mishandling of BSE, we seem to have developed a media with an insatiable interest in any kind of food safety issue, however minor. This brings in its wake, a constant stream of stories regarding “cancer causing chemicals” and the like. This seems to me to carry two dangers. First, whilst many are able

to see through media alarmism, this is certainly not universally true and it always seems to me that the elderly in particular are more at risk of being caused unnecessary worry. Secondly we have to be prepared to deal with real emergencies in the food area and, for the population as a whole, there is a danger of being perceived as crying wolf too often. Of course there are several very responsible food journalists in the UK (and I will spare them potential damage to their careers by naming them) but I find it difficult to conclude overall that we have a very accurate or proportionate degree of media coverage.

From EFSA's point of view the UK is of course simply one of the 25 food authorities with which we deal. Few of the others have quite the same degree of sensationalism, although I remember on my first EFSA visit to Athens being greeted by a correspondent who asked me "whether the 2004 Olympics would not be marred by large outbreaks of food poisoning". I felt quite at home! I should perhaps add that, not least due to the actions of the Hellenic Food Authority, there were no outbreaks of food poisoning at the Olympics.

From the start EFSA has taken views that whilst it has the role of establishing core scientific messages across the EU, it cannot act in isolation in their communication but needs to do so in active co-operation with national food authorities. In return national food authorities quite reasonably want the opportunity to contribute to EFSA's scientific work and to be involved in developing as well as communicating the resultant messages. My colleague Herman Koeter, EFSA's Deputy Director, is currently chairing a working party with national authorities aimed at ensuring that there can be maximum national scientific input into EFSA Scientific Committees and Panels. At the same time we are strengthening our communications facilities with national food authorities, both by videoconferencing and intranet, so as to ensure rapid interchange of views and information, particularly in times of crisis. Finally my colleague, Anne-Laure Gassin, EFSA's Director of Communications, chairs regular meetings with her communications counterparts in all the Member States so as to exchange views on the communications aspects of current topics and to examine handling of both past and prospective topics. In this way we hope to achieve a greater willingness amongst national authorities to operate from the same core science whilst providing a communications message which is both culturally sensitive and meaningful to the particular circumstances of that country.

Precisely because risk assessment and risk management are closely linked, we have already held one crisis management exercise with our counterparts in Member States and the Commission. I am pleased to say that as a follow-up we and the Commission will jointly hold a further such meeting later this year involving risk assessors and risk managers for Member States. We very much hope that this will help the EU to deal better with future food crises, whether real or media inspired, recognizing that food scares tend to operate on the

principle, once enunciated by the singer Judy Garland in a rather different context, namely that “no matter how bad things are, they can always get worse!!!!”.

## **Conclusion**

You might well ask, as we have now reached conclusion time, what possible conclusion could be drawn from this hotchpotch of remarks? It is a challenge. Yet I think there is an issue which is common to everything I have been saying. “Food Safety” is an endlessly fascinating subject with which to deal because it involves the full gamut of human experience from “hard science” on the one hand to “raw emotion” on the other. And in the debate these extremes have to be recognized but also be controlled - as extremes normally do in life. If people have a marked emotional dislike for the concept of say additives, they may indeed be entitled to a very high level of regulatory protection even if overall purely scientific levels of concern are comparatively low. Conversely scientists are entirely entitled to maintain their view on the comparative safety of approved GMOs without being exposed to groundless attacks on their integrity by those who have strong emotional objections on the issue. The media, possibly as well as covering extreme views, have a responsibility to inject balance and enough information to allow readers to form their own conclusions. Science and scientists are often accused of being arrogant. If this is true sometimes, they are certainly not alone. Those who would prefer a debate conducted purely on emotion can show the same characteristic.

The truth perhaps is that we need to take a balanced view. I was once asked, needless to say by the media, whether my real position was that “everything should be decided on the science”. “No”, I said - much to the surprise of the interviewer - “I don’t think that all decisions should be taken on the basis of food science alone. What I *do* think is that the science should be known and clearly explained *before* relevant decisions are taken”. I don’t think my interviewer understood the difference but I am sure, Ladies and Gentlemen, that you do!

Thank you very much.





## Previous Campden Day Lectures

### **Recent European legislation on foods**

*R.F. Giles (Clerk Advisor to the Select Committee on European Legislation). 17.5.79*

### **Food research in the UK in the 1980's**

*Professor R.F. Curtis (Director Institute of Food Research, Norwich). 22.5.80*

### **The problems of the food industry in the 1980's - can technology help?**

*K. Durham (Chairman, Unilever). 21.5.81*

### **Talking is profitable**

*A. de Angeli (Editor of the Grocer). 19.5.82*

### **The structure of the food industry**

*Sir Adrian Cadbury (Chairman, Cadbury Schweppes). 2.6.83*

### **The UK food industry - has it anything to learn from Europe?**

*M.G. Heron (Operations Member and Deputy Co-ordinator Food and Drinks Co-ordination, Unilever N.V.). 30.5.84*

### **The case for publicly funded agricultural and food research**

*The Earl of Selborne (Chairman, Agriculture and Food Research Council). 5.6.85*

### **The challenge of change**

*G.T. Pryce (Chief Executive, Dalgety). 5.6.86*

### **The scientist in contemporary society**

*Professor D.M. Conning (Director General, British Nutrition Foundation). 27.5.87*

### **Towards a food policy**

*Sir Dennis Landau (Chief Executive Co-operative Wholesale Society Ltd). 8.6.88*

### **The food industry: past, present and future**

*R. Buckland (President of the Food and Drink Federation). 7.6.89*

### **The role of the Priorities Board in the 1990's**

*Dr B. Smith, CBE (Chairman of the Priorities Board for R&D in Agriculture & Food). 13.6.90*

### **Food safety and nutrition: burden or opportunity?**

*Dr A.J.F. O'Reilly (Chairman, President and Chief Executive Officer, H.J. Heinz Company, USA). 5.6.91*

### **Europe 1993 - risks and opportunities**

*Lord Plumb DL MEP for the Cotswolds. 3.6.92*

### **Science and technology: matching the market**

*Professor W. Stewart (Chief Scientific Adviser, Head of the Office of Science and Technology). 9.6.93*

### **Current issues in a major European food company**

*A. Riboud (Chairman, BSN (Danone), France). 8.6.94*

### **Consultation not confrontation in food-related policy**

*Professor M. Gibney (Director of Institute of European Food Studies at Trinity College, Dublin). 7.6.95*

### **What's ahead for the global food industry**

*W. MacMillan (retired Chairman, Cargill). 12.6.96*

### **What biotechnology can do for the food industry**

*Professor Derek Burke (Chairman of the Advisory Committee on Novel Foods and Processes). 4.6.97*

### **Food and the public interest**

*Christopher Haskins (now Lord Haskins) (Chairman of Northern Foods). 3.6.98*

### **Partnership and innovation in food supply: key ingredients for success**

*Sir Richard Greenbury (Chairman, Marks and Spencer plc). 9.6.99*

### **Science advice, policy making and public confidence**

*Sir Robert May (now Lord May) (Chief Scientific Adviser to the UK Government). 7.6.00*

### **Is food safe?**

*Professor Sir John Krebs, Chairman of the Food Standards Agency 6.6.01*

### **Whither food and agriculture? - trade and technology**

*Dr. Robert L. Thompson, Chairman of the International Policy Council on Agriculture, Food and Trade; Senior Advisor, Agriculture Trade Policy, World Bank 12.6.02*

### **Globalisation: opportunity or threat?**

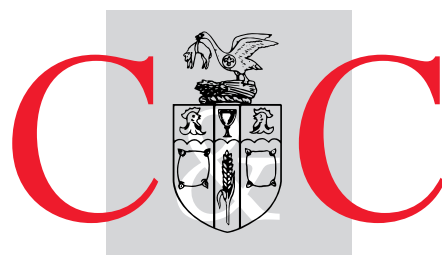
*Sir Donald Curry, Chair of the Sustainable Farming and Food Group 12.6.03*

### **The role of food in social change**

*Iain Ferguson, Group Chief Executive of Tate & Lyle plc 9.6.04*

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