

## **IS OUR FOOD SAFE?**

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There was a time before the deregulation of food safety and cuts to federal food and agriculture programs when I could say with confidence and pride that Canada had the safest food anywhere in the world.

There was also a time when we had the best independent scientific agricultural research in the world.

Is our food safe? I no longer feel I can answer an unqualified “Yes” to that question.

Let me talk to you today about some of the reasons why I and many other Canadians are worried about the safety of our food.

The reasons are familiar to anyone reading the papers or listening to the news: hog factories, Mad Cow disease, foot and mouth disease, beef hormones, antibiotic resistance, *E. coli* O157:H7, salmonella, listeria, genetically manipulated seeds.

Some say behind every food catastrophe of the past decade is the drive for cheap food.

It's time we had a good hard look at intensive farming policy and the promotion of over-production of cheap food. Who says that more is better? Increasingly people are judging that more is not better. It is worse, for the animals, for the farms, for the farmers, for the water and for our health.

It's also time to question the bizarre notion that food regulation and enforcement by the industry is the way to maintain and improve food safety.

Public concern for food safety has to do with things like hog factories with manure lagoons, an overpowering stench, and God knows what in terms of drug residues. These hog factories are raising questions not only about water supplies and clean air but also about unsafe food. 75% of the aquifers in Iowa are polluted by the hog manure.

Canada had a major pork recall last August because the meat was contaminated with a dangerous cancer causing drug called carbadox. In November 1999 a new report appeared in the New England Journal of Medicine linking an outbreak of fatal salmonella in Denmark to the use of antibiotics in pigs.

Do any of you know how many pounds of valuable antibiotics are fed to animals every year in the United States? Twenty-five million pounds - roughly 70% of total U.S. antibiotic production - are fed to pigs, chickens, and cows. And this is for non-therapeutic purposes like growth

promotion. Meat producers use 8 times more antibiotics than human medicine, which is only 3 million pounds a year, according to a new report from the Union of Concerned Scientists.

Using antibiotics in pigs, cattle, chicken and even fish to increase growth rates has long been cited as a probable source of antibiotic resistance.

I want to say a word about BSE - mad cow disease. The disease is spread by feeding rendered animal parts back to cows. Now you farmers know that cows are designed by nature to feed on grass not other cows. But here we are still putting rendered animal protein in animal feed.

Worse than that, we imported animal feed from the U.K. **after** their mad cow disaster. Talk about asking for trouble. There was a newspaper report that said Canada was putting road kill and dead pets in animal feed. Is our meat safe? Is our beef safe? Well, Newsweek magazine recently did a cover story on Mad Cow disease spreading and asked "Should I stop eating beef?" The answer was: "That depends on your level of risk tolerance."

Some say mad cow disease is a warning shot across the bow of intensive farming practices, the worldwide distribution of animal feed and other animal products, and the demand for cheap food. Mad cow disease is nature's way of saying something's wrong. Mad cow disease is proof that biological boundaries are real. Animal, plant and human kingdom barriers can't be transgressed with impunity.

The practice of feeding rendered animal protein and poultry manure back to cattle is a fairly low-tech innovation. It does not compare with the complexity of putting human genes in pigs and other experiments in genetic engineering. The story of mad cow disease is a warning of the unpredictable dangers inherent in efforts to tamper with biology.

Mad cow disease is basically the result of commercial interests forcing the crossing of biological boundaries leading to a new disease. For economic reasons, grass eating animals were fed something they would never eat in nature.

No wonder the Canadian Food Inspection Agency has moved to a "risk-based" food system. We used to have a food system based on the precautionary principle. The shift in preventing harm from happening in the first place to managing the damage after the harm is already done, is a huge threat to the health of Canadians. The damage we are dealing with is illness and death.

I know something about agriculture and the food industry. And you know, some people try to discredit those of us who have different opinions than those of giant agribusinesses like Monsanto, Dupont, Novartis and Cargill.

My record still speaks for itself. Canada did more agricultural research in the 11 years I was Minister of Agriculture than they did in all the previous years. We had the biggest branch of government research. We knew what we were doing. We didn't have Monsanto or anyone else telling us what the science was. We had our own government scientists. And they were the best in the world.

We led independent research. That was possible because we had a Prime Minister in Pierre Trudeau who believed in public research for the public good. Today, it seems that the only research that gets done has a narrow commercial focus.

We have a Governor-General today who said in her government residence there will be organic food, and safe food, and Canadian food. See, at one time we had control of our total food system. We believed in food security. We believed in pure food. We didn't rely on hormones and antibiotics. Now it seems as if Agriculture Canada and several other federal departments are working to promote the concentration of food and agriculture into the hands of a few giant agribusinesses.

They pay sports stars more per box for their name on the box of cereal than the farmer gets per box. Farmers only get 4 cents from a box of Corn Flakes. And they say we can't pay for labelling to inform us stupid people about what we are eating. Proper labelling costs passed onto the farmer - phooey.

We are seeing today a North American-style collectivisation of farming that would rival the old Soviet system in the U.S.S.R. Corporate control over the food system is the corporate control over life. Farmers don't know where to turn. Governments aren't protecting their interests. Farmers are surrounded not only by concentrated market power from the companies that buy their crops and animals. Farmers are also surrounded by the companies that are selling expensive inputs like genetically modified seeds, fertiliser, hormones and antibiotics.

Farmers are on a capital-intensive treadmill. As farm prices dive, Monsanto and others are there to sell genetically modified seeds for corn, soybeans and canola to farmers who are desperate to try anything. The economic benefits of this technology has not been proven. While farmers are suffering from years of depressed prices, a few giants of agribusiness enjoy soaring profits from the same line of goods.

In Ontario, gross farm income increased an average of about \$2.8 billion a year between 1974 and 1999. However during that same period, realised net farm incomes have actually declined, by an average of \$92 million annually. Every cent that Ontario's farmers have gained from adapting to changing conditions has disappeared in increased costs (National Farmers Union figures).

Now it seems that it's not government's business to direct agricultural research and to tell industry what to do and what not to do. Now industry is telling government and telling us what's good for us and we don't have the right to challenge them. When I was Minister of Agriculture, I felt it was my business, all the time.

And the people working in Agriculture Canada when I was the Minister were trained in agriculture and they were serving the public. Now we have people running Agriculture Canada who don't know a cow from a sow. People are being brought in from the Privy Council Office, Treasury Board, Finance and International Trade to promote something called the "Life Science Industry".

Life science companies are playing God and manipulating the blueprint of life as if it were a machine they owned. Talk about arrogance. Life sciences are going to save us from Mother Nature by destroying nature. Some call it the new “Golden Calf”. Others call it a Mad Cow!

We are being told that biotechnology must figure prominently in Canada’s food production. There’s never been a debate or a public discussion. This is something that has been “determined” by the upper echelons of government and industry.

Now all of a sudden food and drug regulations have to be revoked and replaced to facilitate this new industry and its biotech products. The first thing that has to go is the *Food & Drugs Act* because, and I’m quoting a Health Canada document here, “the Food & Drugs Act has too narrow a focus on safety”.

I read in the paper where the assistant deputy minister of Health Canada told 50 pharmaceutical company representatives in California that the federal government plans to transform the Experimental Farm in Ottawa into a centre for biotechnology experiments. And what is the government of Canada offering these drug companies? Tax breaks and the fastest drug-approvals anywhere (Ottawa Citizen, December 13, 2000).

Canada now has genetically modified organisms mixed into 3/4 of our processed food: soya, corn, and canola. The U.S. had 74% of the global acreage of genetically modified crops, and Canada had 10% in 1998.

Scientists can insert genes into plants - the shotgun approach - to give them a natural insecticide or make them resistant to weed-killing chemicals. They can create supersized fish and animals. But there is trouble in GMO paradise. Some people can have allergic reactions to proteins in the new plants. One study raised concern that pollen from the new Bt corn is killing off the monarch butterfly larvae on milkweed in surrounding fields. There was an incident last fall where StarLink corn - not approved for human consumption - found its way into taco shells and other foods.

Common sense is the common trigger for the survival of the human species. And common sense says you don’t eat a Bt toxin that kills monarch butterflies.

All this has happened in advance of long-term testing for human health and the environment. It has happened without anyone knowing because the government won’t label the products.

Remember, these products are alive - bacteria, viruses, plants, and animals. They’re alive. So they are inherently more unpredictable than chemicals or nuclear products. Secondly, these products reproduce. Third, they migrate. They proliferate. They mutate.

You can’t recall them to the laboratory. So we have profound questions that have to be scientifically verified. We can’t just “assume” everything is alright. In chemistry, we have a science called toxicology. It’s not that good, but it allows you to judge some risk. In biotechnology, there is no comparable science that can assess the risk of releasing a genetically engineered organism into the environment or putting it in baby food.

There is no science. Remember it took 30 years of research on DDT before they established its hazardous side effects. When I chaired the Senate committee hearings into rBST, the bovine growth hormone, one of the shocking things that came to light was the fact that the regulator was all set to approve this drug without the health data required by law. They gagged their scientists. Files were stolen from the scientists reviewing the drug submission. This was in Ottawa not Moscow.

The heroes in that episode are the brave Health Canada scientists who spoke out and exposed the fact that there was no testing for human health effects of rBST.

I couldn't believe we had this medical doctor coming before our committee testifying that rBST was safe for humans - but couldn't produce a scrap of evidence to back it up. Then we had the veterinarian testifying that rBST was not safe for the animals. And now rBST is coming in with American products and is in baby formula.

I don't imagine that Monsanto has given up trying to get rBST approved by Health Canada. They just hired Health Minister Allan Rock's senior advisor to go work for them.

Today the federal government is an advocate of biotechnology and refuses to fund and conduct independent testing of genetically manipulated products. Because there is no testing and no science, Monsanto and the others can't get insurance on their products for long term catastrophe.

This is why the British Medical Association and others are calling for a global ban on the release of genetically modified materials until they can be proven safe. The precautionary principle should be applied because "adverse effects are likely to be irreversible".

I'm so worried about what we're doing - putting human genes in pigs and cattle - uncontrolled release of GMO's - no human or environmental testing. How about human genes in a rat bigger and more ferocious than before. I wake up in the night asking what in hell are we doing playing God with the blueprint of life?

My doctor in Ottawa wanted to talk to me. What did he want to talk about? He's got little kids and he wants to know what's going into their food. He said: "Do whatever you can to stop this crazy and dangerous science of shooting genes into plants using viruses and then feeding it to children and not letting parents know what's in the food."

You know, the Royal Society just came out with a report saying Canada's biotech regulators are in a conflict of interest with the biotech industry and that Canadians are being used as guinea pigs. This isn't some scare mongerer. This is the Royal Society of Canada's expert scientific panel on food biotechnology.

Why is Ottawa force-feeding Canadians unlabeled, untested, uninsured mutant food? Will Canadians swallow anything? What we are doing is bad. It has to stop.

Let me tell you a true story about the one scientist in the world that had a team of 18 scientists and a lab testing a genetically modified potato. His name is Dr. Arpad Pusztai. He published over 300 scientific articles in the field of plants. He is a member of the Royal Society of Edinburgh.

He developed a rigorous method for testing transgenic potatoes on rats. After only 10 days the rats developed a weakened immune system and abnormal development of the pancreas, intestines, prostate, testicles, liver, and brain development. The genetic instability of the potato was also startling. Within 2 days of making these findings known, he was fired, the team disbanded, the lab closed and all the data was confiscated. Everything was taken.

You would think that these kinds of preliminary results - his rat study was only for 10 days - would call for more research not less.

The Colorado Beetle dies if it eats the leaves of the plant and the tubers are supposed to be safe???

Dr. Pusztai said: "We are eating things which we have not eaten before. And I challenge anyone who can predict the consequences of this. Particularly for our immune system, which is there to protect us from any injury coming from the outside world. People feel very concerned about their food, not just for their sake, but for their children and grandchildren."

Testing of genetically modified organisms is commercially secret. The Canadian Food Inspection Agency and Health Canada tell us that all the technical and scientific data on all this technology is secret. Adverse effects on human health and the environment are secret. Well, I say that if it is all secret, then it isn't science. And that is what the Royal Society of Canada says too. You can't claim a regulatory system is science-based if it is not open to peer review and available for all to see.

The Royal Society says the level of secrecy surrounding testing of new GM food is unacceptable. The public must have access to the results of the tests - or else there is no science base to the approval system.

The Royal Society also spoke about the consequences for closing down all the independent research at Agriculture Canada, and those are the growing conflict of interest in the scientific community and the domination of the research agenda by private corporate interests.

The Royal Society spoke out and supported what Professor Ann Clark at the University of Guelph has been saying for years. Genetically manipulated organisms should not be presumed safe unless there is reliable, independent publicly available scientific data that demonstrates the safety.

This kind of scientific testing and verification has to replace the CFIA's reliance on what they call "substantial equivalence". Right now these GMO's are allowed on the market because the CFIA and Health Canada says they look the same as conventionally bred, plants and therefore

don't warrant testing. Some people think that "substantial equivalence" would be better named "substantial fraud".

Is genetically modified food safe? Well, if you asked Dr. Pusztai, he would say nobody knows and they won't let anybody find out. And by the way, you can read Dr. Pusztai's findings in the most prestigious medical journal in the world - *the Lancet* (16 October 1999).

I want to conclude with a few comments about Canada's food safety system in general and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency in particular. The Auditor General of Canada reported this February that the food safety agency is rife with serious shortcomings. The biggest problem is the conflicting mandate. One of the most important lessons learned in Europe is that you shouldn't put food safety functions and food promotion duties in the same agency. That is a conflict of interest. That's asking for trouble. Monsanto gave Ag. Canada \$600,000 to develop a Roundup resistant wheat!

Here's some of what the Auditor General has to say: "Shifting from regulatory regimes to reliance on industry has been controversial. Some have expressed general concerns that public health and safety could be compromised because industry would place profit ahead of public health and safety."

A 1994 Health Canada study found that the need of a company to maintain consumer confidence and avoid lawsuits "does not cause manufacturers to adopt measures to avoid injuries, where the cost of the measure is greater than the cost of settling civil actions for an injury or death." I'm quoting from the Auditor General's Report, Chapter 24, paragraphs 29 and 30.

Is Canada's food safe? Well, the Auditor General is suggesting it won't be if you just rely on industry alone.

When the CFIA was established in 1997, they were told by the government to cut 10%. Nobody cared how or where, just make the cuts. So the senior managers at the CFIA decided to cut 200 professional field inspectors. I suppose this makes sense if you are moving to industry self-regulation. You wouldn't want vets out there inspecting operations. Four years later, the CFIA now has about 200 more employees but they are working at headquarters in Ottawa, not in the field.

In creating the CFIA, the mandate was to privatise the inspection system. They called it "alternate service delivery". This privatisation didn't work. It fell flat on its face but it left the inspectors demoralised. Everyone was waiting for their lay-off notice. To make professional morale even worse, senior management at the CFIA are not providing the proper support to the front-line inspectors.

There are meetings where managers refuse professional advice from their vets because it could mean the Department would be "liable". Those who promote science, proper inspection and in-depth understanding of food safety, human health, and animal health are sometimes

viewed by senior managers in Ottawa as “trouble-makers”. This has a devastating impact on morale.

I’m not making this up. Read the Auditor General’s Report on how the CFIA mishandled the largest outbreak of food-borne disease in Canadian history when 800 cases of salmonella were reported. 80% of those affected were children under 15 years of age. The CFIA to this day never reported on this incident and never provided key documents requested by the Auditor General of Canada.

The other mistake at the CFIA was the way they brought in a new meat inspection system in federally registered plants. It’s called, as you know, the Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points - HACCP. Some food inspectors call it Have A Cup of Coffee and Pray! The program was implemented as a way to cut more professional staff and cut resources in the CFIA. So now what’s happening, is that inspectors are pulled off plant inspections in order to train and implement the new program. Instead of cutting 200 field staff, they needed to hire 200 to implement the HACCP program properly.

Can someone tell me why we think we can or should cut corners on food safety? Does anyone in Treasury Board or the Finance Department understand that spending money on a strong and independent food safety system will save billions of dollars in health care bills and will also save lives!

Canadians have a right to safe food. Canadians are willing to pay for safe food. No tax break can compensate for the essential work being done by government food inspectors in the field.

Is our food safe? No. Not as safe as it should be. Not as safe as it needs to be.

At the end of the day, food producers and the food industry in general will lose the confidence of consumers in their products if we continue down this road to food safety privatization and de-regulation.

Only a strong and independent food safety regulator doing its own independent safety research can restore the public confidence in the food we eat. If we let industry set the food safety rules, there will literally be no limit to what we’ll be swallowing from our plates.

Canadians want pure, clean, safe food and so does the world market. Let’s produce what consumers want and have a right to.

Farmers have suffered disaster in the last 20 years. People are losing confidence in the way their food is produced. We can’t continue like this. It’s time to get back to pure, safe farming practices.

Let’s produce in co-operation with Mother Nature.  
Let’s farm with the family and not in a factory.