

Mad Cow disease is turning Europe against Thatcherism

by Marcia Merry Baker

The outbreak of "Mad Cow" disease, or bovine spongiform encephalitis (BSE), first identified in England in the early 1980s, which was then needlessly spread by the free trade "deregulation" policies of the government of Margaret Thatcher (1979-90), has now become the occasion for renewed national economic security concern on the part of European Union (EU) members and other governments on the continent. Though as of mid-April, the exact actions that will be taken in the campaign against BSE have not been finalized, the EU member governments are under heat from public outrage over how London, and the EU Commission in Brussels, reassured them for years that BSE was "under control," and that it was "no problem." However, all along, over the 1980s and 1990s, BSE cases continued, and were spread abroad.

Thatcher's deregulation policies are based on the same free trade premises as those of the World Trade Organization, International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and the panoply of "one world" agencies. Therefore, the nationalistic response of many nations to protect the security of their food supplies, and to counter British free trade demands, constitutes a potentially healthy policy shift.

The ban on British beef

Many ask whether a maneuver by Britain's John Major government in March to raise the issue of potential BSE-human links, was a deliberate scare tactic, to create conditions that would force the EU to pay for BSE clean-up. We can't say for sure, but whatever the motivation, the style was outrageous, and provoked a counterreaction.

On March 20, British Health Secretary Stephen Dorrell told Parliament that there may be a link between BSE, and the human analog of BSE, called CJD (first described in the 1920s, by German researchers Creutzfeldt and Jacob). Dorrell

said that ten anomalous cases of CJD were under investigation (involving relatively young people, stricken in recent years), for a possible transmission from BSE, because the symptoms of the victims did not fit the usual CJD pattern. Dorrell provided no data. And those doing the study, in Edinburgh, said they were withholding specifics until published by *Lancet*, the British medical journal, on April 6.

France responded on March 21, by banning any imports of British beef. By March 22, dozens of nations had taken similar unilateral action. The EU Commission announced on March 21 that France's action was illegal under EU treaty rules; but on March 23, the Commission reversed itself, and said that nations have a right to take "precautionary" action where an immediate threat to their food supply is perceived.

This isn't the first time that EU member nations perceived London's mishandling of public health matters as a threat to their own security. In May and June 1990, many EU nations unilaterally imposed a ban on British beef imports, including France (May 30), West Germany (June 1), Italy (June 6), and Switzerland (June 14). However, on June 7, 1990, the EU Commission pledged to tighten various measures regarding BSE control (cattle imports, contaminated feedstuffs, etc.), and France, West Germany, and Italy rescinded their bans on British beef.

On April 1-3, 1996, EU ministers held almost round-the-clock sessions on what to do about BSE. They decided that their ban on British beef would remain, until further notice. However, the EU approved, in principle, a generous compensation program, to pay Britain for cleaning up its herds. The level of compensation will be about 70% of costs, which is far greater than the 50% compensation rate specified in EU conventions for agricultural disasters. London is to provide the EU with a clean-up plan, involving selective culling of

herds, by the end of the month of April.

In truth, the spreading of BSE is no "natural" disaster. It is the result of willful negligence by the Thatcher government. This fact is not lost on farmers, nor on the general population in Europe.

Even so, the Major government has not even accepted the EU compensation offer. Still miffed by the EU intransigence over retaining the ban on British beef, the government has not decided to accept. British Agriculture Minister Douglas Hogg's press conference on April 3, on the EU decisions, lasted only 22 seconds. When he gave a report-back to Parliament, he raved, "The ban is not justified. It is inappropriate and should be removed."

Mad over paying for Mad Cow

But London's fuming is nothing compared with the anger against London on the continent. The economics minister of the German state of Rhineland Palatinate, Bruederle (Free Democratic Party), called the EU's 70% compensation offer completely unjust. He said that instead, Britain should pay compensation to German farmers, who are suffering huge losses from the public fear of beef.

The daily *Süddeutsche Zeitung* wrote on April 2 that "Britain is like a combination of victims and culprits." The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* on April 2 accused Major and his government of "having the gall to suggest it [BSE] was now a European problem." *Die Welt* on April 2 wrote, "Undoubtedly the crisis has unleashed an undercurrent of resentment which throws into doubt urgently needed European solidarity."

In France, Luc Guyau, the head of the FNSEA, the largest farmers' union, called on the government to form a "crisis group," with the assignment to "preserve the revenues of cattle growers badly hit by this crisis of British origin."

The best anecdote is from France, reported by the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. A British reporter came to interview a French farmer whose entire herd was culled in late March, after one case of BSE infection was diagnosed. The British reporter asked the farmer, how he "felt about" seeing his cows killed. He grabbed the reporter by the hair, yelling, "You English swine! First you infect my cows, and then you ask me how I feel about it!" And now, the EU says that he must help pay the British for doing it.

British manipulation of science is 'horrific'

British government irresponsibility over biological science has also come in for strong criticism, especially from France. Marc Savey, chief of the Health Department at the National Center of Veterinary Studies and French representative within the EU veterinary committee, told *Le Monde* on March 26, "We are in a situation which can properly be characterized as horrific, on the verge of scandal. It is intolerable that five days after the announcement of the British government, the scientific community still does not have access to all the medical information on this dossier [of the 10

CJD cases under investigation].

At the EU March 22 veterinary meeting, British representative Dr. Robert Will, who had authored the March 20 report to Parliament on transmissibility of the encephalopathy between cows and humans, did not provide any written material for his counterparts. After EU veterinarians met again on March 25, Savey told *Libération* on March 26, "It is scandalous" that Will gave only an oral report, with nothing for other European experts to study. "Today we still have no objective information. I had come [to Brussels] to discuss written documents. This is a total break with the scientific communication practices on such a very grave problem."

How great is the danger?

Skip eating beef, is the response of much of the public. As of the end of March, national sector meat markets in Europe had fallen, on average, 30%. The German market fell 70%, the Portuguese market 50%, and the French market 35%. France has been severely hit by a collapse of 70% in its meat exports to Italy, its prime importer.

What is the danger of humans contracting BSE? The *Lancet* article on April 6 did not verify one way or another. Dr. Will wrote, "We believe that our observation of a previously unrecognized variant of CJD occurring, to date, only in persons under the age of 45 years, is a cause for great concern. That it is due to exposure to the BSE agent is perhaps the most plausible interpretation of our findings. However, we emphasize that we do not have direct evidence of such a link and other explanations are possible." The Edinburgh group has studied the 10 cases, looking at what the victims ate, what factors they may have in common, etc. The victims were all between 16 and 39 years of age at time of diagnosis. (The peak incidence of classic CJD is at age 65.) The *Lancet* authors write, "The 10 cases of CJD . . . are remarkable in that they have a specific neuropathological profile which, to our knowledge, has not been described previously."

Studies of the transmissibility of various forms of spongiform encephalopathies, from one mammalian species to another, have been undertaken for over two decades (minks, sheep, goats, elk, hamsters, mice, monkeys, domesticated cats). It has been the judgment, so far, that scrapie (the sheep and goat disease) and BSE are transmitted by neither a virus, nor a bacterium, but via a form of animal protein particle (sometimes called a "prion"), whose presence in the victim, over a relatively long time period, results in malformation of healthy animal protein in the brain and spinal cord. This agent does not seem to be transmissible in muscle meat, nor in milk, but only through the infected brain or spinal cord material.

The 30-year record of experimentation shows that, in the face of preliminary veterinary results of the 1970s, no responsible government could have taken any of the actions Thatcher did. *EIR* is preparing a "timeline" review of exactly how Thatcherism spread Mad Cow disease.