

Provisional Draft: 'Heroic Age of Food Control June 1917 – July 1918

The First World War showed that Britain could no longer hide behind the protection of the English Channel, and that citizens were no longer safe from the ravages of a continental war. This was evident from the winter of 1914, when German Cruisers bombed a number of east coast resorts, rapidly followed by the aerial bombing attacks on London and other towns in the southern part of England. By 1917 the Home Front had become the logical extension of the battlefield. The pursuit of total war, and any tactic which caused the collapse of the Home Front, was now regarded as a legitimate weapon in the pursuit of total victory. In dealing with the challenge of this crisis, historians have tended to eulogise the efforts and achievements of Lord Rhondda, the second Food Controller, while denigrating his predecessor, Lord Devonport. In particular, Lord Rhondda's period of tenure has been hailed as the heroic age of food control, playing a crucially important role. This aim of this paper is to reassess this interpretation.

One of the main challenges Britain faced in the Great War of 1914-18 was in terms of food supply, an area to which Britain was considerably more vulnerable than any other country embroiled in the conflict. In terms of calorific value, 60 per cent of Britain's food originated from overseas, while in the case of wheat, 75 per cent was imported, and in respect of sugar the country was virtually totally dependent.

Such a precarious state of affairs did not appear to unduly worry the country. Thanks largely to the strength of its navy and its extensive merchant fleet, Britain was able to continue with its pre-war laissez-faire policy with regard to food security. It was only the crisis, precipitated in 1916 by a poor wheat harvest in Britain and North America, coupled with the possibility of unrestricted submarine warfare that the government was finally forced to act. The political crisis of December 1916, which heralded the replacement of Asquith by Lloyd George as Prime Minister, that a Ministry of Food was established with Lord Devenport being appointed Food Controller

Devenport had been Lloyd George's Parliamentary Secretary when he had been President of the Board of Trade. During his period of employment there, he had been described as clear headed and business like, and adept in terms of his ability to cope with challenges. Whilst acting as Food Controller, he was rapidly vilified by the press, resulting in the public demand for his dismissal. His resignation in May 1917 was the inevitable outcome when he lost the confidence of Lloyd George and the War Cabinet.

His replacement, Lord Rhondda, was portrayed in an entirely different light by the civil servants within the Ministry of Food. His tenure was hailed as establishing the 'heroic age of food control', being a precursor for the widely hailed system of food control and distribution which was developed in the Second World War. This paper will show that the contrast between the performance and achievements of the first two Food Controllers is largely an illusion and that many of the policies which Lord Rhondda followed were actually formulated during Devonport's period of office.

Devonport's reputation and the role of W. H. Beveridge(Lord Beveridge)

During his period of tenure as Food Controller, Devonport had an acrimonious relationship with his subordinates at the Ministry of Food whom he termed 'molluscs'. He had a particularly difficult relationship with W. H. Beveridge, later to become Lord Beveridge for his role as one of the architects of the welfare state. This was also evident in his dealings with Stephen Tallents, who was in charge of the Local Authorities division. Tallents was openly critical of at Davenport's inactivity in dealing with the introduction of rationing.

It was Beveridge and Tallents who, in their post war accounts of the role of the Ministry of Food, were to leave Davenport's work as Food Controller so tarnished, leading a number of more recent authors to describe Davenport as being 'spectacularly incompetent' and 'timid' in his policies. While it is clear that he did not approve of compulsory rationing as he considered it un-English in character, it was, as Margaret Barnett has shown, Davenport who advocated compulsory rationing in the spring of 1917. Moreover he was portrayed at the time as the champion of the voluntary scheme of rationing and food economy campaigns, which were regarded by the government as a viable alternative to compulsory schemes.

Davenport's power to determine food policy during this period was, in fact, considerably more circumscribed than his critics have implied. Food policy was determined mainly by the War Cabinet and, rather than endorsing Davenport's advice, they relied on the advice of the Royal Society's Food (War) Committee. Davenport, however, became a useful scapegoat for the food price inflation and the growing war weariness of 1917.

The Second Food Controller Lord Rhondda

Lord Rhonda, his replacement, was regarded in an entirely different light by the civil servants at the Ministry of Food. This, however, was not due necessarily to a more enlightened policy towards rationing, as many of the policies he pursued had been developed during Davenport's period. Instead, the praise he received was, at least in part, motivated by his attitude to the civil servants. Beveridge, for example, argued that as soon as Lord

Rhondda took office it resulted in a stream of active minded civil servants, which released the energy of others in the Ministry of Food. Lord Rhondda was also eulogised for his willingness to delegate much of the Department's business. His motives for this approach were, however, a pragmatic response to his illness. Initially he had been reluctant to take over the office of Food Controller because of his health, only being persuaded to do so by Lloyd George. During his period in office his health continued to deteriorate, and he was forced to leave more and more to his civil servants. His death in July 1918 led to him being eulogised further.

The heroic age of food control.

Beveridge described Lord Rhondda's thirteen months as Food Controller as the 'Heroic Age' claiming that 'nothing of first rate importance... carries on into it from the earlier stages of confusion.' The changes he introduced were, however, bitterly opposed by some within the Ministry and led to confusion and delay. During November and December 1917, the infighting within the Ministry occurred at a time when large numbers of people were engaged in a daily battle searching for food. A number of studies have shown that, on average, food consumption patterns remained more or less the same throughout the war, with the exception of late 1917 when there was an estimated 9 per cent fall in the calorific value of the food consumed. There were a number of reasons for this. One factor was of course the German U Boat campaign, which had a significant impact on levels of food imports. Food shortages were also compounded by food rotting at the dockside because of a lack of transport.

Another cause of food shortage was the system of maximum price controls and the schemes for determining profit margins for producers, distributors and retailers introduced by the Food Controller. Maximum price controls had an adverse effect on the supply of those commodities which were covered by the legislation. The introduction of maximum prices on magazine and butter encouraged countries such as Holland and Scandinavia to send their produce to markets where there were no price controls.

Another reason for the lack of certain supplies was the financial constraints imposed by the Treasury. According to Lord Rhondda, in the autumn of 1917 when there had been an acute shortage of fats in Britain, the Commission had to turn down an offer of 10,000 tons of lard because of the lack of money.

Equally important in accounting for the food shortages was the effects of increased demand. An increasing number of families benefitting from full employment, higher wages prevailing in munitions production and the increase in female employment, could now afford more and better quality food.

Increasingly the grievance was not so much the actual shortage of food, but the inequality in its distribution. This was particularly evident in terms of the way the working classes were being affected by the shortages while the wealthy were able, or at least were perceived as being able, to obtain everything they needed.

Ministry intervention achieved mixed results. The most successful was, as Margaret Barnett has shown, in relation to 'breadstuff policy'. Wheat was designated as an import priority, while a proportion of flour was made from substitutes such as barley, and the extraction rate of flour from wheat was raised from 70 per cent in November 1916 to 91 per cent in April 1918. The scheme was so successful that it 'became the fundamental axiom of food control during the second world war.'

The food distribution system, based on the 'datum period', restricted wholesalers to purchasing a certain percentage of a foodstuff according to the amount that they had purchased on a particular date in the past, i.e. the 'datum line.' The amount of food each wholesaler was entitled to could be varied as items became either scarcer or more plentiful. As one observer lamented it distributed food to each district' based on misleading, antiquated, radically unsound information.'

Even Beveridge acknowledged that the system, at best, was a very rough and ready one. Instead of rationalising transport and handling problems, it tended to make them worse. Retailers still acquired their stock from as many wholesalers as previously, but they were now restricted as to how much they could purchase from each supplier. Customers were not guaranteed a definite supply. It still allowed them to go from one shop to another in search of what was available and, as a result, this encouraged queuing. The system impacted equally on the shops that served both the rich and the poor. It was, however, the poor who could least afford a reduction in their food consumption. As Peter Dewey's analysis has shown, the working class intake of food 1904-13 was only 76 per cent of the national average. It was only the more affluent sections of the skilled working class that could afford a diet of 3,300 calories per day, which was estimated to be essential for a nutritionally adequate diet. The war had also led to significant demographic changes with a population shift in favour of the main industrial towns. These growth centres of population were, however, only being allocated a quantity of food based on their pre war, and now grossly outdated, figures.

In an almost desperate attempt to alleviate some of these problems, the Ministry developed a system of supplementary allowances based on reports from inspectors who were sent to visit the different districts. These measures proved to be of limited value.

The food Crisis

The food crisis intensified in November 1917. Inspectors reported that in Birmingham, there were long queues for butter and margarine as well as concerns that munitions workers, who

were unable to queue as a result of their work commitments, would be unable to secure supplies. By mid December, reports from London described instances of as many as 3000 people, often women along with their children, waiting in thick fog and intense cold for margarine. In Lichfield, it was reported that flocks of people came from outlying areas to stand in queues, often two hundred yards long and six deep, with many being forced to go away empty handed.

Such experiences led to social unrest which spilled over into strikes and walkouts among industrial workers. In Walsall, for example, 7000 miners threatened to leave their work and join the queues. As their leaders explained 'they could have work at any time, what they wanted now was food.'

At this point Lord Rhondda attempted to revive the much vilified voluntary rationing scheme and economy drives in an almost desperate attempt to restrain the demand for food. His efforts tended only to inflame the situation, encouraging demands for positive action, preferably in the form of a compulsory rationing scheme. Queues were not only regarded as undermining morale, but also as fermenting social unrest and raising the fear of revolution, in particular the spectre of Bolshevism. As the *Herald* noted, 'almost all revolutions start because people wait in crowds for food.' Even the more conservative *Times* noted that they were a 'fertile source of grumbling and discontent.'

These concerns eventually prompted the War Cabinet to authorise Lord Rhondda to introduce a national system of compulsory rationing scheme. On the 1 January 1918 sugar rationing began in Britain. Its effects were limited.

Immediately after Christmas 1917, an even more serious crisis emerged due to the virtual disappearance of meat in a number of areas. As early as mid November 1917, Lord Rhondda had been formally warned of an impending meat shortage, but had made little attempt to deal with the crisis. As Beveridge later admitted, 'it was certainly one (foodstuff) to which little attention had been paid.' The shortage was, in part, caused by the Ministry introducing a sliding scale for fat cattle prices in the autumn of 1917. Such a scheme prompted farmers to sell their animals earlier in the season than normal, leading to an initial glut followed by a shortage in the New Year. At Leeds cattle market, for example, there were normally 6-800 cattle for sale in the first week of the year, whereas in the 1918 there were only 14. These shortages prompted a number of local rationing schemes to be devised in an effort to alleviate the meat crisis.

On 22 February 1918, Lloyd George, Bonar Law and General Bonham-Caret visited Rhondda in an effort to 'discuss' the crisis. Tallents, who also attended the meeting, described Lord Rhondda as a 'bullied schoolboy, powerful but obviously perplexed, while his visitors standing over him, cross examined him about his plans for ending the queues.' Two days later Lloyd George discussed the possibility of sacking Rhondda. If he had been sacked at

this point he would have been considered a spectacularly incompetent Food Controller, possibly far worse than his predecessor.

Even Beveridge, his most loyal supporter, was later to admit that Lord Rhondda's response was to bring about a near breakdown within the Ministry. This was accompanied by a detailed discussion about breaking the Ministry into its component parts, namely Home Production, Foreign Purchase and Distribution and Control of Prices.

This coincided with the introduction of a scheme for rationing in London and the Home countries. It also encompassed a scheme to ration meat in addition to butter and margarine. The introduction of these schemes were initiatives which Rhondda had no direct involvement with and consequently does not really deserve the credit for. It was the success of this scheme that literally saved Lord Rhondda's reputation. It is easy to exaggerate the role this rationing scheme played in dealing with the food crisis. Although there was a definite decline in the supply of food in late 1917, this was only temporary and supply rapidly returned to pre-war levels within the next few months. Moreover most people were prepared to tolerate a degree of muddling through as long as it was perceived that everyone was making similar sacrifices.

Food Control 1939-45

Following the outbreak of military hostilities in September 1939, the reconvened Ministry of Food rapidly became responsible for purchasing the vast majority of agricultural commodities at the farm gate, and for coordinating the distribution of food to consumers. The powers of the Ministry of Agriculture to regulate agricultural production were also strengthened and extended in a variety of ways. Under the Emergency Powers (Defence) Act 1939, the Minister of Agriculture was empowered 'To preserve and maintain agricultural land solely for the production of food, to control, by order the cultivation, management and use of the land in order to secure maximum production from the farms; to terminate any tenancy of agricultural land where it is considered the land is being neglected or badly cultivated'.¹ Such legislation effectively conflated the executive and adjudicatory functions of the Ministry, enabling it not only to encourage farmers to endorse the food production campaign, but also to impose a variety of sanctions on those farmers who were unable or unwilling to implement its directives.

Compared with the achievements of the first world war, this new system was not only far more comprehensive and coordinated, but also considerably more effective in ensuring than the population were not forced to endure the food shortages which affected most of the other countries embroiled in the conflict.

Conclusion

The claim that the food distribution under the jurisdiction of Lord Rhondda constitutes an 'heroic age of food control', establishing a blueprint for food control in the Second World

War merits reappraisal. While his role in the First World War has been widely eulogised, in practice, his achievements were far more mundane. His reputation has been significantly enhanced by the glowing accounts of his work produced by Beveridge, while at the same time being keen to castigate his predecessor, Lord Devonport. Rationing controls during Lord Rhondda's period of tenure were neither comprehensive nor clear.

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