

# ALL-PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUP ON VEGETARIANISM AND VEGANISM

PRESENTED BY



## **‘Veggie Vurger anyone? EU proposal to restrict plant-based descriptions**

Committee Room 3a, House of Lords, Wednesday 17 July 2019

Christina Rees MP, Chair of APPG on Vegetarianism and Veganism, opened the meeting and introduced the MPs in attendance, Kerry McCarthy and Lord Stone.

### **Stephen Pugh, EU Food Labelling Specialist Consultant:**

- The regulation of food labeling 1169/2011 states that food labels must not be misleading.
- The combination of labelling plant-based food as a meat, whilst also flavoring it to taste like meat, can be deemed as misleading.
- There are several contradictory areas of the 1169 regulation that state that anything that can be deemed as misleading, must be highlighted as such to consumers. Therefore, a clarifying statement such as ‘made with Quorn’, may suffice in achieving this.

### **Alexandra Clarke, Campaign Manager, Humane Society International:**

- September will reveal whether the proposed restriction will go to the new AGRI committee in parliament or European Parliament. Brexit adding further uncertainty.
- There is no evidence of consumers being confused by existing labelling. It’s not appreciated by many EU citizens the idea that European institutions have started to police and overregulate what we call food products.
- Insider information revealed that ultimately, the catalyst for this proposal was lobbying from the French meat industry.
- We understand that there are producers that are concerned about their livelihood and rightly so. This may be an opportunity for farmers to enter new markets and government should consider how they can support farmers to transition to new forms of agriculture, given the growth potential of this new market.
- Will be speaking and writing to members of EU Parliament to prevent restriction from becoming EU law, with the support of a coalition of NGOs, including The Vegan Society and the Good Food Institute.

### **Ryan Simpson-Trotman, Orwells Restaurant:**

- We, at Orwells, actively cook vegan food on a daily basis, and really believe in natural, sustainable foods.
- Describing dishes/food in terms of their ingredients should be an exciting prospect as a means of promoting the natural ingredients, as opposed to 'pretending' by including their animal counterpart within the name.
- Portrays changes in labelling as an opportunity to be creative.
- After a discussion with the Development Chef at Waitrose, who highlighted the issue that identifying vegan cheese as a 'block' is unappealing, Ryan concludes that there needs to be a greater focus on the ingredients.

#### **Tess Kelly, Quorn Foods:**

- The impact this restriction would have on plant-based companies (including small and upcoming start-ups) is a disproportionate and unjustified disadvantage due to the scale of change and the costs.
- Would detract staff from their jobs of developing healthier and more sustainable meat alternatives.
- It becomes complicated when we start looking at emerging products that are looking to combine plant-based proteins with meat proteins. Will a certain percentage of meat be required to classify the product as a burger? A real need for clarity is required.
- We've been selling meat alternatives for over 30 years and have over 11,000 customer contacts each month, and thus far, there are no records of a complaint whereby consumers have mistaken a Quorn product for a meat product.
- Veggie/vegan food can now be found in designated areas within supermarkets to make the consumer journey clearer. The way we navigate our choices has not been fully looked into and we reject the fundamental premise of the proposal.
- Customer confusion exists on a macro level, in terms of provenance, sustainability and healthier eating. There is no need to increase clarity on what constitutes as a meat product and what doesn't.
- In terms of Quorn's response to the proposal, we require further clarity, it's currently very vague and there is no suggestion as to what these products should be called. She then emphasizes how a restriction would interfere with the easy swaps, to familiar-sounding plant-based foods, required for the needed 'dietary shift operation'.
- Finally, she states that such a restriction would need an incentivizing framework and comments that it could undermine the sector, potentially catalyzing damaging implications to the environmental, social and health issues that are trying to be addressed.

#### **Parliamentarian comments**

##### **Kerry McCarthy:**

- Expresses an agreement with Ryan Simpson-Trotman in that a larger focus on the products themselves and their ingredients is an exciting notion.

- Acknowledged that encouraging a shift from meat to plant-based is eased by similar looking foods.
- Discusses how a move away from labelling plant-based products as a meat substitute may combat hostile responses often catalyzed by such labelling and so can understand the proposed restriction, however still wishes to resist it.

#### **Lord Stone:**

- Proposes that consulting with supermarkets such as Waitrose and M&S may be a step towards obtaining some level of clarity in the restriction, as both sell meat and plant-based products and have achieved a clear distinction between the two.

#### **Audience questions/comments**

- Meat producers, for example Heck, are also diversifying into plant-based food and such a restriction would 'hinder their sales'.
- References to the French meat industry wanting to interfere – is there a problem to this?
- Discussion, without reference, research into people being afraid of trying new foods. She claims that 'it's about 40% of women and about 50% of men' and as such clearly defining the product content is key for this large demographic.
- Adds that the demographic 'scared' of trying new foods show a greater willing to try plant-based foods in contrast to meat-based.

#### **Panel responses**

- Agrees that, internationally, companies are beginning to diversify.
- Comments that the driving force is the producers whose livelihoods are threatened by the changes in consumer demand and that perhaps it should be the Government's role to ensure that there are 'funds within agricultural policies to ensure they get the correct training and equipment' to shift their production in line with consumer demands.

#### **Stephen Pugh**

- Expresses his belief that 'meat-type labelling on plant-based products' is acceptable because it facilitates choice.
- References previous lobbying by the French meat industry in 2010.
- Comments that money was the catalyst for developing meat in the form of sausages and it is again the catalyst for companies diversifying into plant-based products. This is used as justification for creative labelling that accurately depicts product ingredients, as this aids an informed choice.

#### **Ryan Simpson-Trotman**

- His example 'a nice, slow-roasted butternut, peanut and spinach bake, in brackets, sausage-style'.

- Responds that if food is presented in the format of a meat-product, consumers will continue to refer to it as its meat counterpart, questioning the aim behind the restriction.
- Confirms that restrictions are not necessarily needed as such, but a more creative approach with a greater focus on the product's ingredients is.
- Discusses that after the larger corporations such as Waitrose and M&S have invested in creating ranges of veggie/vegan products, it is in their best interest to resist investing further time and money into renaming. As such, they provide 'an enormous, very profitable, conscious base for allies'.
- Agrees that UK supermarkets can be useful in preventing the restriction, but notes that joint action from the civil service and industry can catalyze criticism for the civil service being a 'voice for industry'.
- Highlights potential inconsistency in that 'burger' is an abbreviation of 'hamburger' which originated from patties made from Hamburg German cows in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As such, should all burgers be made from Hamburg cows?
- Expresses belief that current food names do not cause confusion, but that incorporating their meat counterpart in plant-based product names is 'wrong'.
- Highlights the difference between supermarkets and restaurants, in that often menus are restricted for room. Describing all the ingredients may ill portray a dish, inhibiting accurate visualization, when it could have been better described with reference to its animal counterpart.

### **Concluding comments**

- Reflection on meat producers in Brussels expressing their concern on the nutritional information available on plant-based product packaging, because they believe plant-based foods contain fewer nutrients.
- Suggestions that communicating that plant-based products are not classed as carcinogens, by the WHO, may be another step in addressing such health concerns.
- Questions on how far this can go.
- Remarks on consumer confusion in how to use plant-based products, specifically plant drinks. Comments this can be addressed through names such as 'coconut milk' or 'oat milk' because it aids understanding of their uses.
- Comments that in combatting childhood food phobias and childhood obesity, presenting them with viable food alternatives with similar names is essential.