‘***Time for a War on Waste’, Stephen Bates***

We waste a lot of food! It is estimated we throw away an alarming £13BN worth of food a year in the UK (*The Guardian*, 10th January 2017). This at a time when the United Nations Food & Agricultural Organisation estimates 11% of the world’s population suffers from chronic undernourishment.

The problem is colossal, global and urgent. A report last week by Boston Consulting Group warned global food loss is set to increase by 1.9% per year to 2.1bn tonnes, equivalent to 66 tonnes per second by 2030, unless urgent action is taken (BCG, *Tackling the 1.6bn Tonne Food Loss and Waste Crisis*, 20th August 2018).

Wasted food means wasted inputs needed to make that food and associated wasted energy with it’s impact on greenhouse gasses. Disposing of food waste - by both companies and consumers - is relatively easy, cheap and there are few penalties against doing so at any stage in the supply chain. At the same time, expiry dates and aesthetic requirements of our food are often unnecessary and restrictive.

Some organisations, such as FairShare, are doing an excellent job in the middle of this all, trying to bridge the gap and re-allocate excess food from manufacturers, retailers or consumers, to people who really do need the food. Visiting my local FairShare depot in Ashford, Kent, I was amazed by both the breadth and quantity of surplus food in it’s warehouse. The food came largely from supermarkets, which had either over-ordered from their central distribution or their manufacturing suppliers had failed to deliver the product within given agreed technical specifications. For example, I saw an entire pallet load of in-date tinned spaghetti hoops which had been rejected because they did not have the requisite number of hoops per can. Good on the retailer - Tesco in this case - for making their culpable supplier give the pallet to FairShare to redistribute rather than throw it away.

But unfortunately, we are throwing away our food and in increasingly large amounts. As we throw away more and more, we are also throwing away the plastics in which much of our food is wrapped, which can end up clogging our oceans and affecting our marine wildlife. Plastic pollution and marine conservation also need to be radically addressed.

As a Government we are making good progress to tackle this in the UK. We have set out our 25 year Environmental Plan, with important moves to cut plastic, create a new environmental watchdog and boost wildlife habitats. We’re consulting on banning plastic straws, stirrers, cotton buds and on taxing businesses producing single use plastics.

As Conservatives, we must also use the tools of Government to help inform, reward good practise and where necessary penalise bad, so that good consumer behaviour drives the market. New plastic bag usage in supermarkets has dropped 86% in England since charges were introduced in 2015. The possible increase in the plastic bag tax to 10p announced last week would help to ensure this continues.

Some consumers need no encouragement with respect to reducing food and plastic waste. Anyone who saw the BBC’s *Blue Planet II* cannot fail to have been moved by the impact of plastic pollution in our oceans. In fact, we had a record 162,000 responses to the Government’s consultation on how to reduce plastics and boost recycling. But many of us still need to do a lot more.

And make no bones about it, with rising labour costs and intense competition, grocery stores – as Margaret Thatcher reminded us – are tightly run ships, where food waste is already carefully measured and high on a store’s Key Performance Indicator list.

Shops with the least waste can operate more efficiently and offer consumers better pricing. So let’s tell consumers that. Let’s have each local store publish its waste levels to help consumers choose where to shop. And to help retailers, let’s have food manufacturers publish their waste levels too.

The Boston Consulting Group also called for an eco kite mark on food products, akin to the Fair Trade logo, to help encourage shoppers to buy from companies truly committed to reducing food waste. Also last week, agri-food bank Rabobank launched an initiative in Asia to encourage innovative start-ups develop technological solutions to address food loss.

Britain can - and should - be at the leading edge of such innovation, tech, targeted finance and legislation to address food waste and plastic reduction. So let’s seize the opportunity available to us through Brexit and make Britain a great global model for reducing food waste and its associated plastics.

Our grand parents and great grand parents had to ‘*make do and mend*’. Now it’s time for us to make do and mend our ways, and imaginatively use the tax system, legislation, innovation and technology to make Britain a leader in food and plastic waste reduction.

As well as making good economic and environmental sense, it also makes compelling political sense as current and future generations will thank the Conservative party for so doing. We have no time to waste!

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