

Notes from the PACE Supporters Meeting, 1st April 2025 at Mistley Village Hall.

A PACE Food Group debate on the motion - ‘Going local’ is the key to food system resilience.

23 people were present, including the team of five from the Food Group who were running the debate, and a few people who had not been to a PACE meeting before.

Andrew Whitefield welcomed everyone, explained the programme, and proceeded to chair the debate. Speaking against the motion for the first 10 minutes were Chris Bowden and Dominic Watts. Summarising very briefly, they started by saying that ‘local’ is almost impossible to define, whether it be geographically, or practically, with so many aspects to consider - growing, processing, manufacture, packaging, retailing, etc. They admitted that they are keen on using local food producers and shops themselves where practical, but that food trading has been global for hundreds if not thousands of years, and people are happier for it. For most people going local is not ‘the key’ and would be a risky strategy.

Next, Tony Ellis and Jim Sumberg spoke for the motion. Their argument was in four parts: “1. Britain’s food system has been ‘going global’ for a very long time; 2. The resulting food system that we see today is associated with high levels of ill-health, inequity and environmental degradation, and the system is vulnerable; 3. Radical reform is definitely needed. . . but ‘more global’ is definitely NOT the answer. . . ‘going local’ will mean a more resilient food system; 4. We can make this happen; there is no room for naysayers!”

There was then a refreshment break, which gave everyone time to digest and discuss what had been said so far. This was followed by the speakers on each side having another 10 minutes to rebut each other’s arguments. The subject was then opened up to the floor for questions or comments, which stimulated plenty of lively discussion. Points raised included:-

- ‘Going seasonal’ needs to be considered alongside ‘going local’, meaning that the negative impacts of methods used to extend the season of locally grown foods need to be weighed against the impacts of transporting food from afar.
- Food needs to be seen as part of a much bigger picture of consumerism and international trade.
- The level of understanding amongst the general population of how and where food is produced is much lower than it used to be, and this is a concern.

There was no vote at the end, although the audience were asked to raise their hands if their views had been changed at all, and a relatively small number of hands went up. Thus it was not possible to judge formally whether or not the motion had been carried, and the outcome seemed to be that the two sides were agreeing with each other almost as much as they were disagreeing. 'Local' could not really be defined, and it became obvious that there are very many features of our food system that have to be taken into account.

Perhaps we could have focussed more on the meaning and significance of 'resilience'. Should we have talked less about mitigating climate change, and more about what happens when the system breaks down?

The debate format was something PACE had not tried before, and could be worth revisiting in the future.