

Slaughter of a holy cow

The Politics of BSE
by Richard Packer

Reviewed by Francis Beckett

- 1 Sir Richard Packer, once a Whitehall highflyer and the youngest permanent secretary at the Ministry of Agriculture, is an angry man. He worked for politicians for years, and had few illusions about them. 24, as he makes clear in this extraordinarily honest book, he was not above using subterfuge to help his political master, whoever it was. I think he expected an eventual discreet retirement, during which his former masters could rest easy in the certainty that their secrets were safe with him.
- 2 But for that deal to hold, politicians had to keep their side of the bargain, and New Labour broke it. He gave them advice they did not like, and Downing Street¹⁾ briefed journalists, untruthfully, against him. So he has used his diaries and his scientific training to tell the inside story of the BSE crisis, including the advice he gave to ministers and their responses. Even written in his formal civil service style, it is an electrifying tale.
- 3 BSE — mad cow disease — emerged in cattle in 1986, but the government insisted for 10 years that it could not be transmitted to humans and that it was safe to eat beef. One agriculture minister, John Selwyn Gummer, invited the press to photograph him feeding beefburgers to his daughter. Then, on March 20, 1996, the then health secretary, Stephen Dorrell, told Parliament that 10 young people had contracted variant CJD, which is always fatal, probably from BSE. By September 2000 there were 80 victims of CJD. Most of them were young. No other country suffered to anything like the same extent.
- 4 It wrecked the British beef industry, not least because the European Union banned British beef. The ban, which in 1997 Tony Blair vowed to have removed within months, was only lifted in 2006. But Sir Richard's story is not that of the illness, nor even its effect on the industry, but, as his title implies, the politics.
- 5 When Dorrell made his sensational announcement, John Major's Conservative government panicked. Groups of ministers gathered in meetings whose decisions were reported, mostly accurately, in the same day's *Evening Standard*, and then changed by a slightly different group. Major decided on a policy of non-cooperation with the EU until it lifted its ban, a policy that Packer and others warned could not succeed, and it did not succeed.
- 6 But if things were bad under Major, they got far worse when Labour came to power in 1997. Tony Blair required a very quick reversal of what remained of the EU beef ban. Packer thought this was harder than Blair imagined, and was told that it could be done if he had the will and determination. And that is when Downing Street started briefing the press that the ban could be lifted but for the obstructive mandarin at the ministry.
- 7 The skids were under him. Newspapers were told, falsely, that he was to be singled out for criticism in the report on BSE. This book ends there, but he

battled on until 2000, when a newspaper carried a report that he was to be forced out. Packer had not heard any such thing, but the newspaper turned out to be better informed than he was.

- 8 Packer's civil service writing style makes for clarity but not always for easy reading. You find yourself constantly looking back to the key at the beginning to remind yourself what one of the bewildering sets of initials means. But if you can get used to this, the book tells us a great many uncomfortable facts about the way Britain is governed. Ten years ago no top civil servant would have written a book like this. For good or ill, this change must be counted as part of Blair's legacy to the country.

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not 1 Downing Street: the London street that houses the official residence of the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. It is also used as a synonym for the UK Government.