



SCOTTISH FOOD COALITION'S 2021 ELECTION HUSTINGS: A SUMMARY

On Tuesday 30th of March 2021, the Scottish Food Coalition (SFC) hosted an online husting ahead of the Scottish Parliament elections, during which candidates of the five main parties were able to debate and share their plans for fixing our food system. The event was attended by over 200 participants, representing all areas of Scotland¹. The 1.5-hour debate was preceded by an information session with videos on the four key themes (jobs, health, poverty, and nature) which structured the evening. This allowed participants to learn more about the Scottish Food System and formulate questions for the candidates. The best voted questions were put to the panel by the host, Brian Taylor, former political editor for BBC Scotland and columnist for The Herald.

The Hustings set out to interrogate the commitments from the five parties related to the food system, as well as their specific engagements on a Good Food Nation Bill. This bill, of which the SFC have been longstanding campaigners for, is a vital step in transforming Scotland's food system. It was due to be introduced in March 2020, as per the Scottish Government's commitments in their Programme for Government (2019-2020), however it was shelved due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Unfortunately, the need for food system transformation has not disappeared, and the pandemic further exposed the inequalities that require a bill to be brought forward at the earliest opportunity. The Hustings therefore served as a way for the SFC to identify which parties would support a Good Food Nation Bill to be introduced in the new parliament, after May's 2021 Elections.

Panel:



Jim Fairlie: Scottish National Party (SNP) candidate for Perthshire South and Kinross-shire (first time candidate, taking over from Roseanna Cunningham MSP). Was a sheep farmer for 13 years, started the Perth's farmer market, first of its kind in Scotland.

Note that due to technical difficulties, Mr. Fairlie was not present for the whole event, in particular debates on health and poverty.



Rhoda Grant MSP: Scottish Labour candidate for Highlands and Islands. Party spokesperson for rural economy and tourism since March 2021. Member of the Co-Operative party.

¹ As per results of a poll asking participants where they joined the meeting from (185 responses): 31% Lothian, 18% Glasgow, 13% Mid-Scotland and Fife, 11% North East Scotland, 10% Highlands & Islands, 8% West Scotland, 4% South Scotland, 4% Central Scotland.



Mags Hall: Scottish Greens candidate for Mid-Scotland and Fife. Political researcher and environmental activist, with a background on food sovereignty.



Liam McArthur MSP: Scottish Liberal Democrats candidate for the Orkney Islands. Party spokesperson on justice and the environment.



Brian Whittle MSP: Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party candidate for South Scotland. Party spokesperson for public health, mental health, sport and wellbeing.

Introduction:

The chair of the Scottish Food Coalition (SFC), Professor Mary Brennan from the University of Edinburgh Business School, introduced the work of the Coalition and set the scene for the debate. Formed in 2016, the SFC brings together civil society organisations who are working towards a shared vision of a “fairer, healthier, and sustainable food system that works for all: individuals, communities, workers, businesses, natural resources and animals”. Prof. Brennan reminded the audience that despite cross-party support, progress towards this objective has been slow and interrupted, with the recent Covid pandemic showing us collectively and as individuals how precious, fragile, and precarious our food system is. She highlighted the need for evidence-based solutions that knock down barriers to systemic change and explained how the SFC partners have been working together across disciplines, expertise, and geography. She said:

“We ask difficult questions about our place within, and responsibilities to, our food system. We consider the different interests, power dynamics and resources available to different stakeholders and how these influence who was heard, what sectors and markets are supported and the balance struck between domestic and export food and drink priorities. We amplify the voices and lived experiences of those so often un heard and we reach across the political divide and multiple governmental portfolios, civil service departments impacted by and responsible to our food system.” – Prof. Mary Brennan

Prof. Brennan commended the presence of participants from all areas of Scotland and ended her contribution by wishing for a vibrant and exciting debate around the four key themes of the hustling: jobs, health, poverty, and nature.

General comments from panellists on food policy in Scotland

Before opening the debate on the first theme of the session, Brian Taylor asked the panellists to comment on the Good Food Nation (GFN) bill and answer the most upvoted question from the audience (82 upvotes): “Will the parties reintroduce the GNF bill, and how will you make sure it is not forgotten or pushed down the agenda?”. All parties confirmed their support for a reintroduction of the bill during the next parliamentary session, and the importance of this piece of legislation that would encompass all aspects of food, from field to fork.

“It must come back in the next Parliament, and it must be given the credibility that it needs.” – Brian Whittle

“The Good Food Nation bill has to happen.” - Rhoda Grant

*“There was consensus about the need for a Good Food Nation bill [...] there’s no doubt that in the next session of Parliament we are going to have to return to this.”
– Liam McArthur*

The opposition unanimously condemned the decision of the SNP to shelve the bill and expressed their disappointment at the lost opportunity of tackling some of the challenges before Brexit and the Covid crisis. Mags Hall (Green) described how the bill was a very good example of cross-party collaboration to bring forward legislation:

“The only reason the Good Food Nation bill appeared in the programme for Government is because all the opposition parties worked together to bring in amendments into Holyrood to get it back on the agenda.” – Mags Hall

The complexity of food system related issues, and the absence of clarity over the exact content of the proposed Bill were amongst the reasons highlighted by the panellists for this lack of success. The opposition accused the SNP of hiding behind Brexit uncertainty and the Covid crisis, although Jim Fairlie (SNP) took this opportunity to remind the audience that no food policy existed before the party came into power in 2007. Throughout the debate, the panellists agreed that whilst there was broad consensus on the underlying principles of the bill, its actual contents remained up for discussion. Several acknowledged the value of experts such as the Scottish Food Commission’s recommendations, the SFC manifesto, and the Farming for 1.5° report, for bringing ideas to the table.

Theme 1: Scotland’s food system and jobs

This section was introduced by a short video featuring Scot Walker, food, drink & agriculture activist at Unite (the largest trade union in the UK, and member of the SFC). He outlined how the food system plays an essential role in Scotland’s economy, with 1 in 10 jobs related to agriculture. However, 48% of people working in the food sector in the UK are paid below the real living wage, and workers in retail and hospitality have been particularly hit heavily by the pandemic. Scot Walker ended his presentation with a call for action towards policy makers:

“The Scottish government celebrates the continued growth of the food and drink sector, however there is an urgent need to look beyond exports and address the major challenges of employment abuse.”

Discussion:

Brian Taylor opened the debate on jobs by referring to the following audience question: “What can we do to ensure that the Real Living Wage is paid to retail and hospitality workers?”. The discussion that flowed from this led to a wider discussion around the need to make all food related jobs profitable, including farming. Overall, all panellists agreed that people working in the food sector need increased recognition, from farmers and manufacturing employees through to waiters. All candidates mentioned this would be primarily supported by better compensation, and a move towards the Real Living Wage. Brian Whittle (Conservative) also observed that public procurement had a role to play by ensuring local producers receive appropriate retribution and can pay their employees.

The panel then debated the related issue of skills development and education. Mags Hall (Greens) mentioned how difficult it can be for people in some rural areas to access a high level of farming and agricultural education. Other candidates also commented on the need to recognise and develop professional skills outside of formal education structures.

Theme 2: Scotland’s food system and health

The main challenges related to this topic were presented in a video featuring Rob Gowans (Policy and Public Affairs Manager for the Health and Social Care Alliance), Lorraine Tulloch (Programme Lead at Obesity Action Scotland) and Michelle Carruthers OBE (Chief Executive of Food Train). They explained the crucial link between diet and health, both through high consumption of unhealthy foods and malnutrition. In Scotland, two-third of adults are either overweight or obese, whilst at least one in ten older people are at risk or suffering from underweight. The video demonstrated how food system interventions will have consequences for Scotland’s national health. Like with jobs, the video ended with a call to action for the government:

“Food and the food system must be a governmental priority if we are to ensure the short and long-term health of Scotland’s population.”

Discussion:

The main questions related to this topic focused on improving access to fresh and healthy food for all. All panellists agreed with the central premise that food and health are connected, and that improving diets was necessary to reduce the burden of disease. However, there were two very different perspectives related to the underlying causes of obesity and malnutrition in Scotland, and by extension how this challenge should be tackled. The Labour and Green candidates argued that the main issue is inequality, rather than choice, whereby people in difficult financial circumstances get stuck in a vicious circle of diminished access to quality food. The solution therefore lies in reducing prices, through shorter local supply chains and targeted agricultural support, but also improving access to fresh produce with a more diverse retailing landscape and increased wages and benefits.

Whilst the Conservative and Liberal Democrat candidates agreed that access to fresh fruits and vegetables is an issue, they both considered that consumer choice remained one of the main causes for unhealthy diets. Improving dietary health would therefore need a radical long-term food culture shift to replace the current focus on speed. Primary legislation (i.e. banning a certain type of food, or making school meals mandatory) would be insufficient for tackling health issues, as to the Conservative and Liberal Democrat representatives it needs to be driven by the education of children and communities towards the value of a balanced diet.

Theme 3: Scotland's food system and poverty

The video introducing this section featured Mary McGinley from the independent Helensburgh & Lomond foodbank and Polly Jones, Head of Scotland at the Trussell Trust. They highlighted the pressures brought forth by the Covid-19 pandemic on emergency food provision. Polly Jones called for a cash first approach that would allow people to afford the basics for themselves and their families. Mary McGinley ended with a call to incorporate the right to food in Scots' law:

"A Good Food Nation bill founded on the right to food would place responsibility on the State, not on food bank workers and volunteers, to ensure that everyone has a dignified access to nutritious and sustainable produced food."

Discussion:

One fundamental element of this discussion was the relation between food poverty and income, which rose from one of the audience questions: "Will your party commit to ending the need for food banks by tackling low income to address poverty, instead of relying on emergency food provision?"

All parties unanimously agreed that food banks were not the solution and condemned their increasing institutionalisation, however like with the previous topic they disagreed on the way this could be tackled. Candidates from Labour, Greens and Liberal Democrats all agreed that food insecurity is intrinsically linked to poverty, thus embracing a cash first approach. All three expressed their support for the potential for a Universal Basic Income (UBI) to act as a safety net. Mags Hall (Greens) noted that the feasibility of UBI has already been explored in Scotland, and that further pilots would be required to find a model that works locally, which would also allow to capture the wider benefits of such schemes.

Brian Whittle (Conservative), whilst recognising UBI was a really good idea, told the audience that the Scottish Parliament dismissed the opportunity due to its cost. For him, the solution would therefore lie in a rounded approach that brings services closer to communities and keeps quality jobs in most deprived areas, starting by improving transport infrastructure. The other candidates however retorted that the country is already paying for the consequences of poverty in terms of physical and mental health, lower life expectancy and the other social problems that come with it. All panellists agreed that the current welfare reform had been poorly implemented and did not smooth out the cliff edges faced by people on benefits.

The second main topic of this section of the debate was the introduction of a right to food in Scottish law. Except for the Conservative candidate, all panellists expressed their support for this idea, and Rhoda Grant (Labour) reminded the audience of the Right to Food bill consultation started by her colleague Elaine Smith MSP, which she pledged to take forward if re-elected. Rhoda Grant (Labour) put forward that the right to food should be a statutory requirement and a lens through which policy and other government decisions are scrutinised. Liam McArthur (Liberal Democrat) suggested that the difficulty with the right to food was how to define what this would mean in practice.

Theme 4: Scotland's food system, nature & climate

The fourth and final section was introduced by a short video from Anne McCall, Director of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) Scotland. This explained how the food system is both a contributor and a solution to the nature and climate crises. For example, a quarter of Scotland's greenhouse gas emissions come from agriculture, but habitats such as oyster reefs and peatlands have the potential to store carbon. Like the other videos, it ended with a call for action:

“With the right government support and business practice, we can make a food system that works for Scotland's nature and our climate.”

Discussion:

Brian Taylor started the debate with a straightforward question from the audience: “What are your policies for encouraging sustainable farming with a focus on climate friendly agriculture?”. All panellists agreed that farmers and crofters had an undeniable role to play in mitigating climate change and protecting nature. They all mentioned it was fundamental to ensure incentives to producers encourage the reduction of emissions and increasing biodiversity. The panellists acknowledged the efforts made by farmers and crofters and expressed the need to shift the blame away from the agriculture sector. However, the Green candidate deplored the lack of progress in the development of a Scottish agricultural policy, citing this as yet another area of consensus where the SNP failed to move forward. Both Labour and Conservative candidates mentioned the role of public procurement in increasing the visibility and value of local produce. Liam McArthur (Liberal Democrat) also highlighted the need for a range of measures that support local food economies including skill development and regulations, as well as financial incentives.

The second part of the debate was dominated by questions from the audiences related to fishing and aquaculture, and in particular the destructive nature of these sectors. All panellist agreed that both sectors were essential to the economy of the Highland and Islands. However, Mags Hall (Greens) pointed out that endangering marine habitats through decisions such as lifting the ban on trawling, also jeopardise local communities in the long term. Candidates acknowledged the need to improve practices going forward and develop sustainable marine management that ensures the accommodation of competing interests. Rhoda Grant (Labour) suggested the sector needed a more local approach, allowing communities to work together to protect their shared livelihoods.

Concluding remarks

To close the debate, Brian Taylor asked the candidates for their final comments related to the Scottish food system and jobs, health, poverty, nature and climate.

Mags Hall (Greens) expressed her satisfaction to see that the debate was finally encompassing the many areas touched by food, and reminded the audience of her party commitments to tackle the net zero targets as well as economic recovery:

“The food system has a massive role to play in that, so we will be pushing for an integrated Good Food Nation bill, and a renewed agricultural subsidies policy to make sure we are using our land for the best use possible.” - Mags Hall

Liam McArthur (Liberal Democrats) highlighted his party's plans for recovery and dealing with the climate and nature emergency. He indicated once again the value of the Scottish Food Coalition's work on the challenges faced by the food system:

"[The SFC manifesto] goes some way to helping populate the Good Food Nation goal that hopefully we will see brought forward in early course in the next parliament." – Liam McArthur

Rhoda Grant (Labour) also expressed her support for a Good Food Nation Bill, and reminded the audience of the paradox of Scotland; a nation that produces wonderful food yet sees people go hungry:

"We need to use public procurement to make sure that we are investing in our local food, we need to support those that are producing food properly through our agricultural support mechanisms but most of all we need to allow people to afford the wonderful produce we do." – Rhoda Grant

Brian Whittle (Conservative) reiterated the value of keeping produce local, and the role of public procurement. He agreed with the importance of the Good Food Nation Bill, and the need for cross-portfolio approach to such a multi-complex problem:

"We agree on the outcomes we need, we might have different ways of getting there (...) but this kind of discussion can develop the very bones of a Good Food Nation bill." – Brian Whittle

Finally, Jim Fairlie (SNP) reminded the audience of the massive strides made under his party's government in terms of food policy, both at the national and local level. He ended the debate by looking forward to the future debates in the next parliament:

"At the end of the day we all want the same thing. We want a Good Food Nation where people can access good quality food and that is thriving." – Jim Fairlie

Conclusion

The Scottish Food Coalition Husting saw candidates engage in rich and respectful debate over the future of the food system in Scotland. There was clear cross-party consensus on the need to transform the way we farm and eat to tackle the economic, health, societal and environmental challenges we are facing. Support for the introduction of a Good Food Nation Bill and developing food policy in Scotland was unanimous and reflected the commitments of the election manifestos (see [this SFC blog](#) for an in-depth analysis). However, the candidates did not always agree on the contents and purpose of such a bill. Whilst debate is an inherent part of the democracy process, the SFC hopes it will not further hinder the progress towards a Good Food Nation bill. The Covid-19 crisis has further highlighted the failings of the Scottish food system, and the need for urgent transformation towards a resilient, socially just, healthy and environmentally sustainable food system.