

# The horsemeat scandal raises urgent questions about retail governance

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*The recent horsemeat scandal has brought public attention to a range of issues which had previously received little scrutiny. **Wyn Grant** puts the scandal in historical context, explaining how its roots lie in a broader transformation of retail governance in the UK. The current controversy has raised important questions as to whether these broader changes need to be reversed through a reclamation of regulatory authority by the state.*



The controversy over the presence of horsemeat in ready meals has revealed both the complexity of food chains across Europe and also the extent to which consumers' purchasing decisions are driven largely by price, especially in difficult economic conditions. However, it also raises questions about the largely unnoticed growth of a system of private retail governance and whether the state has gone too far in abdicating power to the supermarkets.

The post-war period in the UK has seen a shift in power down the food chain from farmers and food processors to retailers. This reflects the growing market dominance of the big supermarkets, with Tesco enjoying a market share of around 30 per cent of grocery products, and the dependence of government on retailers to hold down the prices of foodstuffs and basic household goods. This restrains inflation and in particular helps those on lower incomes, but it makes the state more dependent on the continued market power of the retailers.

A private system of governance by retailers has developed that meets consumer concerns and goes beyond what is required by government designed systems of regulation and also assists in the delivery of government policy objectives. By the early 1990s in Britain there was a marked trend in public policy to shift responsibility for food matters to the retailers. For example, the major retailers have become significant actors in the promotion and implementation of healthy choices in relation to food. The retailers act on behalf of the state in delivering consumers rights and choices, reflecting the high levels of trust they have enjoyed, at least until now, from the public.

Retailers are involved in a number of policy areas such as preventive health policies that promote the consumption of fruit and vegetables where there is a clear convergence in the interests of retailers and government. However, food safety has been an area in which the shift of responsibility has been particularly extensive. The 1990 Food Safety Act was a significant point which made retailers give more consideration to their responsibility for food safety. An important framework of food law still exists and may lead to enforcement action on retailers that sell food that is contaminated or unhealthy. Nevertheless, the general trend is for public food safety regulation to become less detailed and less prescriptive. There is a greater use of private regulation so it is increasingly the quality and safety standards set by retailers that matter. In [our research](#) on biological alternatives to chemical pesticides, we found that retailers supplemented state regulation with their own complex and demanding private regulations which had an impact on how crops were grown.

This form of relationship is entirely consistent with a depoliticized mode of governance where responsibility is shifted from government to other actors. However, the blurring of public and private authority is not without its problems. The horsemeat scandal raises questions about how far such issues can be left to the retailers or whether government needs to reclaim some regulatory authority.

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.*

**About the author**

**Wyn Grant** is Professor of Politics and International Studies at the University of Warwick. He joined the department in 1971 and was chair of department from 1990 to 1997. In 2010 he was presented with the Diamond Jubilee Lifetime Achievement award of the Political Studies Association of the UK at their Awards Ceremony. He was elected an Academician of the Academy of Social Sciences in 2011.