

Eating ethically

Presenter: Now English children may be returning to school this week with a sinking heart that the turkey twizzler and the concrete chip belongs to a bygone age, but the attempts by Jamie Oliver to revolutionise school dinners may look like child's play for one man. Peter Singer has become known as the father of the animal liberation movement. The ideas lined out in his latest book: *eating what we eat and why it matters*, may make even the most passionate vegan choke on their tofu.

I met him at London's Konstam restaurant which serves locally sourced produce and asked him if it was really realistic to expect the entire population of Britain to live entirely of organic food.

Peter Singer: That's perfectly possible. Now maybe some of it would have to be imported, but it wouldn't have to be taken from far away. And I don't really have problems with importing food if it's sent by ship, because the amount of fossil fuel used when you ship things is relatively limited. So yes, I definitely think we could. It would in some way be more efficient than feeding grain to animals.

Presenter: But industrialisation was all about cheap choice for the masses. We couldn't afford to go back to what was before, could we?

Peter Singer: Yes that's true. And there may, in some ways, be less choice, because although we could certainly feed ourselves well, we would not, I think eat nearly as many animal products as we do now. Because that's a highly inefficient way of producing food: to take grain and soy beans and feed them to animals, wastes a lot of the food value. So even if people would continue to consume meat, they would consume better quality meat from animals that had better lives, but rather less of it. It would be more of a special treat on occasions, I think.

Presenter: I guess you're tapping into a very current preoccupation. Even today, the government's announced healthier school meals for children. Isn't this something that we know already? What are you actually telling us that is new?

Peter Singer: I think we ought to be going a lot further and particularly with regard to the animal products. I mean, most of the animal foods eaten are still factory farmed, so I think that's completely indefensible, ethically, and it's also not sustainable. So I think we have to get much more serious about that and I don't see the government's food programme as really getting serious with those issues.

Presenter: In your perfect world, would everyone be vegan?

Peter Singer: Oh, if you want to ask me about a sort of fantasy utopia, a century or more hence, yes I would hope everyone would be vegan. But I certainly do not expect to see that in my lifetime and it's not really what I'm pushing right now. I'm asking people who are not prepared to go vegan, to think about where their animal products come from and at least to take the decision not to support factory farming.

Presenter: What about if somebody said: "okay, I'm gonna think about it. I've thought about it, long and hard; I just don't care about animals as much as about humans." Isn't that a fair choice?

Peter Singer: No I don't think it is. I mean, then we have a problem. I recognise that we do want to allow people free choice, but sometimes there are ethical constraints. For example, people might have preferred cheap cotton grown with slaves. But the British Empire decided centuries ago that it was not going to allow people to have that choice. So slavery was seen as wrong and was prohibited. I think at the very least, the confinement of animals indoors in conditions where they can't ever get

outside or lead a natural life with other members of their species is something that is so seriously wrong, that it ought to be prohibited.

Presenter: So this is a liberation movement on a par with slavery?

Peter Singer: I think ultimately, changing our attitude to animals and for that matter our long-term sustainability is a movement that is on a par with getting rid of slavery, yes.

Presenter: You use that word retributive. Can you imagine in your utopia of a hundred years hence, people being punished for killing animals? Would they be convicted?

Peter Singer: Well, I certainly think people would be punished for unnecessarily inflicting suffering on animals.

Presenter: As they are already today.

Peter Singer: It's a question of what you regard as unnecessary. In the present system anything that produces an economic benefit to the farmers is seen as necessary. And I don't accept that at all.

Presenter: Jamie Oliver, a name you may be familiar with, can probably take a lot of the credit for getting the school meal revolution started. When would you feel your job was done?

Peter Singer: Well, my job would be done, I think, if the school meals not only were more nutritious, but also were produced from sustainable food that was not raised by causing suffering to animals. So, I would like to see those meals being organically produced, I would like to see those meals, if they use animal products, coming from free-living animals that are out on pasture and able to enjoy their lives.