

Here's One he Buried Earlier.

A short essay that exposes a little of the disgraceful truth about the Blair government's handling of the Foot and Mouth epidemic of 2001, and which has yet to come to press and public attention.

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(See also end note.)

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Ten years ago, on 19 Feb 2001, Foot and Mouth Disease was discovered in pigs awaiting slaughter at an Essex abattoir. In the subsequent tracing exercise, the disease was found in pigs at a farm at Heddon-on-the-Wall in Northumberland on 23 Feb. Within another four days FMD had been diagnosed in livestock – cattle, sheep and pigs – across a broad swathe of the country, mainly in the western counties and as far south as Devon.

It was finally eradicated more than six months later, by which time terrible slaughter had been visited on the nation's flocks and herds. Official figures indicate that about four million animals were killed, but official figures are wrong. Reasonable estimates range from a little under eight million to over ten million. The majority of those animals neither had the disease nor had been exposed to it. A large proportion were selected for destruction in the 'contiguous' cull. This measure was the brainchild of a team of computer modellers at Imperial College, London, headed by Professor Roy Anderson. Some two million others were destroyed under the 'welfare disposal scheme;' restrictions imposed by the government having made it impossible for their owners to care for them. The financial cost of the outbreak was scarcely calculable. The immediate charge to the public purse, some £2.5 billion, was only most visible part of it. Apart from farming many rural industries suffered losses; tourism most of all. Estimates for the damage the outbreak caused to the economy have ranged between £8 billion and £20 billion.

What has any of this got to do with Iraq? Absolutely nothing, of course. Except that if Iraq was the most important foreign policy failure of Tony Blair's premiership, the response to FMD was unquestionably the greatest failure of his domestic leadership. Yet today, while the echoes from Iraq continually reverberate, and the Chilcot Inquiry quietly picks at the scabs of that tragic corpse, the shameful and scandalous story of the FMD epidemic is all but forgotten. Arguably worse than forgotten, as it never really came to light at all.

A reasonable test of the relative attention that has been paid to the two episodes can be made by taking a glance at the index of Blair's book, *A Journey*. Saddam Hussein and Iraq qualify for more than a hundred page references, FMD merits a mere six. The same number as Bob Geldof. Well, at least it's more than Bono. Blair concludes his brief section on FMD with a classically Blairite passage, a passage that glibly and platitudinously claims that Anderson's contiguous cull was a triumph of crisis management. He knows as much, because he's seen the power point presentation, and – gosh! – those things are whizzy, aren't they?

Anderson's computer programme was very far from a triumph of crisis management. It compounded the disaster. The decision to use it at all was a bizarre one, as Anderson's expertise was in the computer modelling of human epidemiology. But the computer was only put in charge towards the end of March, by which time a great deal had already gone wrong.

At the start of the outbreak the most obvious first step for MAFF (the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, which was absorbed into DEFRA, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in June 2001) to take would have been to dust off the Northumberland report of 1969. That report had been prepared by the official inquiry into the 1967-68 outbreak, which was chaired by the Duke of Northumberland. It laid down clear guidelines for how the disease should be brought under control. To all appearances at least, far from using Northumberland as a platform from which to start, MAFF more or less turned its recommendations upside down. From the beginning of the outbreak they acted far too slowly. General controls on the movement of livestock weren't imposed until 23 February. The Northumberland report, and all expert opinion, recommended that slaughter should be within twenty-four hours of detection, but MAFF's procedures commonly resulted in several days delay. Within the first week, FMD was out of control. Indeed, it was probably out of control before the ministry did anything at all.

That is because Burnside Farm, the assumed 'index case,' can't truly have been the first farm to break down with FMD. The circumstantial evidence strongly points to FMD having been present in the national sheep flock for some time – possibly several months – before it was discovered in pigs. Of the three main species of farm livestock, sheep are by far the most likely to survive FMD with little evident distress. In pigs, on the other hand, the symptoms of the disease are dramatic and unmissable. The probability must be that many of the sheep flocks that broke down 'subsequent' or 'consequent' to the outbreak in pigs actually had the disease before a single pig was afflicted. The weaknesses in MAFF's initial response were an aggravating factor, but they cannot explain why the epidemic was so geographically widespread, nor why so many flocks became infected. The only realistic conclusion is that they were infected beforehand. FMD was even detected in sheep that had been exported to France from south Wales on 31 January, almost three weeks before the epidemic was presumed to have started.

But to speak and act as if Burnside Farm was the index case suited the government's purposes. It was a swill farm, one of the relatively small number – 93 in total – that fed their pigs on human food waste. This was a specialist class of pig farming, which necessitated heavy investment in the equipment that was used to cook and process the waste properly. Equipment that couldn't be adapted for other, more standard, diets and systems for feeding pigs.

In the extended fallout from BSE, there was a general pressure across the EU to ban swill feeding. In the event it was banned in the UK in May 2001, as one of the government's responses to FMD. Yet like so many of the controls that are foisted on business and industry, the pressure to ban swill feeding was essentially irrational. People

waste a great deal of food and pigs are omnivorous animals. Swill feeding – when the swill is properly cooked – is an eco-friendly way to re-cycle that waste food. The alternative that has been adopted since it was banned is to dump it in land fill sites, which certainly isn't eco-friendly. The practical danger of swill feeding is that if the swill isn't properly cooked FMD and other livestock viruses can be re-cycled along with the food. But so what? The practical danger of dumping waste food is that FMD and other viruses can be re-cycled when it is picked over by birds such as rooks and seagulls. So proper swill feeding does not only save on land fill, it is also safer than land fill. What is more it is easier to police than land fill. Its inherent risk has long been recognized, for which reason the swill feeders were – quite rightly – the most strictly regulated livestock farmers in the country.

It appears that Burnside Farm was very poorly managed swill farm. It was owned and managed by two brothers, surname Waugh. One of the brothers was in very poor health in the winter of 2000-01 and so Bobby, the fit brother, had an unusually heavy burden of work at the time. Following a complaint made through the RSPCA the farm was visited by Jim Dring, a State Veterinary Service vet, and a Local Authority inspector on 22 December 2000. Dring also paid routine visits to the farm on 30 August 2000 and on 24 January 2001. From later investigations it seems that it may well have been that on at least one of these three visits Dring may have missed evidence of uncooked waste food being fed to the pigs at Burnside Farm. Certainly, for a ministry vet, one of whose most important tasks was to enforce the rules that bound swill feeders, he appears to have been rather casual. On his later admission the condition of the farm was unacceptable when he visited on 30 August 2000, despite which his written declaration that the farm was satisfactory was received in his regional office in Carlisle on 1 September.

On something as important as the enforcement of the swill regulations, farmers had every right to demand that MAFF was fulfilling its task properly. Dring's performance at Burnside Farm was clearly inadequate. In a later report (very much later, as it wasn't published until December 2007) into the ban on swill feeding the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman, Ann Abraham, ruled that Dring's failure to enforce regulations properly at Burnside Farm amounted to maladministration by MAFF.

So it is possible that the Waugh brothers had been feeding uncooked human food waste at Burnside Farm. If they had been it would have been an extremely serious matter, meriting immediate closure and prosecution. If they had been it is possible that their pigs contracted FMD from uncooked food waste. Yet even that wouldn't show that the farm was the index case. Starting from Northumberland in mid February, FMD couldn't have infected sheep that were exported to France from Wales at the end of January. MAFF's investigators certainly haven't produced any proofs that it did originate there, nor even that the pigs were infected through uncooked waste food. What they have produced – and ignored – is evidence that the pigs at the farm most likely contracted FMD from dead sheep.

As well as being swill feeders the Waughs were knackermen. They disposed of fallen animal carcasses from other neighbouring farms. On 24 February and 27 February a Trading Standards Officer made a video of the farm, to provide evidence to support a prosecution. In one sequence a collie is shown tugging at a dead sheep that is half buried in a muck heap. Furthermore, Leonard Mansley, an epidemiologist who worked at the Animal Health Institute's Pirbright research laboratory and who was thus was one of MAFF's own investigating officers, wrote in a sworn statement that he found ovine vertebrae in one of the troughs that had been used to feed pigs. However any sheep bones came into contact with the pigs it cannot have been through processed swill. Sheep vertebrae are unlikely to have come from human food waste at all. What is by far most likely is that they came from one of the fallen sheep that the Waughs were bringing on to the farm.

Given the spread and prevalence of FMD, and the main body of evidence collected at Burnside Farm, it is reasonable to conclude that Burnside Farm's pigs contracted FMD from sheep, not from uncooked food waste. It simply suited MAFF and DEFRA, and all branches of government from the Prime Minister downwards, to scapegoat the farm and swill feeding.

By the middle of March MAFF was out of its depth, FMD was out of control, and the government was panicking. For Blair there was a further complication in that the Secretary of State at MAFF, Nick Brown, was a close ally of Gordon Brown. The panic really hit Blair and his inner circle with full force as they realised that FMD might impact on their main priority. That was the General Election, which they had scheduled for 3 May. Reading the relevant passages of Alastair Campbell's volume of diaries, *The Blair Years*, one gets an impression of how over two or three weeks FMD rapidly came to dominate his, Blair's, and the cabinet's agenda, as MAFF floundered among the mounting pile of animal carcasses.

Of course for Campbell, and most probably for Blair too, what mattered was not FMD itself, but how the media covered the way that the government was dealing with FMD, and who else they could shift the blame on to. Campbell makes no bones about this. After all, his job was presentation. But it does lead him into some remarkable speculations. On 14 Mar he recorded: 'Part of me felt the whole thing was a political ploy by the Tories . . .' It is not wholly clear what he felt was a 'political ploy.' Simply the growing clamour to delay the election? Possibly. Yet from the context it could be FMD itself. It could even be the government's incompetence in dealing with it. The poor man clearly besieged himself with the most awful demons.

Campbell's character and opinions were so important because he was so close to Blair. He had far too much influence for a functionary whose role was to present Blair and the government in a good light.

And presenting the government in a good light appears to be why Anderson and his wretched computer were brought in. The men in Downing Street were desperate to be seen to be in charge, and to be seen to be winning. Anderson's first official contacts with

the government seem to have been through Sir John Krebs, who was chief executive of the Food Standards Agency. In successive steps, MAFF was bypassed. David King, the government's chief scientific adviser and an old friend of Anderson's, used his influence to persuade Blair that he should back a massive contiguous cull. Undoubtedly Blair, ever the man to see worth in slick presentation, was ready to be seduced. He badly needed an answer to the problem that was threatening his core electoral strategy. By moving himself and the new team of scientists to centre stage he hoped to win back the headlines.

In a sense, the contiguous cull couldn't fail in the end. The more livestock that were slaughtered, the less livestock there were left in the country to protect from FMD. MAFF's own foremost authority on FMD was Dr Paul Kitching, the deputy director of Pirbright. He had worked on outbreaks of Pan-Asian O, the strain of the 2001 outbreak, in the Far East. He described the contiguous cull as 'a total suspension of common sense.' The programme did not allow for the different levels of susceptibility of the different species of livestock. It exaggerated the likelihood of windborne spread. Anderson and his team made the wrong assumptions about the virus they were dealing with before they switched their computer on.

However, Anderson's programme was also compromised for the same reason as MAFF's initial response. That was the assumption that Burnside Farm was the index case. From that point on, whether the control measures were directed by FMD experts, such as Kitching, or by whoever could best impress Blair and the media with a veneer of cutting edge scientific brilliance, they were bound to struggling.

At much the same time as Anderson was given charge of the cull, another decision was taken in Downing Street that was typical of the way the Blair government functioned.

Soon after the case at Burnside Farm was confirmed, some officials within MAFF turned their attention to swill feeding. Should it be banned, at least for the duration of the outbreak? Nothing of substance has emerged about their discussions, but then they were probably of a 'on the one hand, and on the other hand' character. In her report the Ombudsman shows that she was persuaded that the veterinary experts in MAFF were making a strong case in February or early March that swill feeding should be banned. Unfortunately she couldn't find any written record that supports her conclusion: 'I do find it surprising that there is not more evidence of that professional advice, or indeed discussion of it, in the Defra papers.' The most likely reason for this lack of evidence is that it was never there. MAFF's own people would have understood as well as everybody else in the livestock industry that even if Burnside Farm had been the index case, there was no good sense in stopping responsible swill feeders from continuing as before. After all, whatever the Waugh brothers had or hadn't done, the ministry's own vet, Jim Dring, had clearly failed to do his job properly. So it appears that if MAFF had been left to deal with agricultural technicalities it is extremely unlikely that the ban would have got any further.

That however, was not the Blair way of government. He did not leave technical issues to technical departments that understood them. At least not if they could be

exploited for propaganda. And so it was that round about the fourth weekend in March everything changed. Of a sudden, MAFF discovered the urge to rush through a ban on swill feeding. *The Blair Years* supplies the clue as to why.

From the entry for 24 Mar: 'I was hoping that yesterday was the real low point in media terms re FMD. Godric [Godric Smith, press officer in Downing Street] was doing a good job. . . . I did the Sundays with a couple of strong lines Godric had worked up on pigswill and 21-day movement of sheep. For the first time in days, we were pushing our own story. I spoke to Nick [presumably Nick Brown] to try to get him to push on the same lines.'

From that point the fate of swill feeding was settled. Shortly after the veterinarians in MAFF provided strong opinions that argued for a ban. A consultation was rushed through, commencing on 27 Mar. Although consultation was a legal necessity, the ministry cut it as briefly as it dared, allowing a mere fortnight for responses, rather than the statutory period of twelve weeks. But the consultation was a sham. Brown and his ministerial team had made up their minds. Swill feeding was banned – with three weeks notice – on 3 May. The swill feeders were given just three weeks to convert their expensive plant and equipment for feed ingredients which they were wholly unsuited. They might as well have been ordered to start running diesel engines on petrol, or vice versa. No compensation was offered. Bizarrely, the only swill feeders to receive anything from the government were the Waugh brothers. The innocent ones, whose stock had been secure from FMD, had their livelihoods wrecked – by government diktat. And in true Blairite fashion, it was done on the say so of the spin doctors in Downing Street, who were desperate to shift the blame for government's own failings.

By late March some around the agricultural industry (though significantly not the National Farmers Union) were lobbying for vaccination to be introduced. Blair toyed with the idea, but wasn't persuaded. Later, on 24 April, some of the world's leading authorities on FMD gathered in London for a press conference. This was a privately organised event. Leading the panel was Professor Fred Brown, who had been head of the biochemistry department at MAFF's own Pirbright laboratory, from which job and nearing compulsory retirement he moved to Wellcome Biotechnology and then the US research facility at Plum Island. In 2001 he was widely held to be the world's foremost expert on FMD. He and his colleagues – such as the Dutch vet Dr Simon Barteling who had recent experience of organising effective control strategies – recommended the use of ring vaccination to control the disease. Fred Brown and Barteling were disdainfully ignored. The government persisted remorselessly with Anderson's massive slaughter programme.

Campbell made one or two half-hearted attempts in the course of April to divert more of the blame on to the victims. He briefly tried to push the notion that farmers were spreading the virus. He seems to have believed that it was actually happening, though no evidence ever came to light. It may even have happened in a very few instances, as – for some – the temptation must have been colossal.

That is because the 'compensation' (actually compulsory purchase) paid out for livestock that were slaughtered with FMD or in the contiguous cull was very generous. The compensation (truly compensation) that was paid for livestock that was destroyed through the welfare disposal scheme was scarcely adequate. The farmers who were compelled to volunteer their animals for welfare slaughter were among the most harshly used victims of the government's ineptitude. They were those who were forbidden to farm in a normal way by moving livestock – sometimes only across a road – no matter how squalid the conditions had become, or how desperately low their stock of feed. Many farmers were reduced to such wretched standards of husbandry that they would, in more normal times, have been prosecuted for neglect by MAFF. That large numbers didn't try to solve their immediate problems by deliberately infecting their animals is testimony to some obdurate quality in the farming community. Whatever that quality is, it cannot be called naked self-interest.

Another issue that needs correction is the notion that FMD was, in some way, the fault of farmers themselves. That it was – as it were – 'generated' on a dirty farm by a dishonest swill feeder and spread through illegal livestock movements. Certainly the infection must have been partially spread through unrecorded and possibly illegal sheep movements in the weeks and months before the outbreak surfaced. However, the ultimate protection of any territory's flocks and herds from FMD and other viruses can only rest with that territory's governing authorities. There are only two possible routes through which FMD could have arrived in 2000-01. One is illegal food imports – important as it was, the proper cooking of swill was only a backstop. The other is by a failure of security at the government's own research laboratory at Pirbright – as actually happened in the much smaller outbreak of 2007. So while the index case of 2000-01 will probably never be known, what is known is that it couldn't have been prevented by anybody in the farming industry. It could only have been prevented by greater vigilance by one or other of the government's agencies.

Towards the end of April the government was starting to get the message across that FMD was under control, and the number of fresh cases was dropping. Anderson's computer – in a flash of presumed perspicacity – was predicting that the disease would finally be eradicated on 7 June. Which just happened to be Blair's revised election date. In truth, whether or not the number of new cases was dropping wasn't clear from the information published by MAFF. Mainly because MAFF changed the way that they counted the farms affected, and changed the way in which they published their figures.

At an earlier stage farms that were slaughtered out 'on suspicion,' or on account of 'dangerous contacts,' were counted in the main headline number of new cases, whether the animals had signs of the disease or not. From late April that changed, and so the contiguous killings went unreported. Even farms that actually broke down with FMD started dropping out of MAFF's reports. On a single day in Cumbria there were twenty-four confirmed cases. Yet for that same day MAFF's website reported the national total as being only nine. Some of the private vets who were contracted to the ministry found

that the criteria for diagnosing FMD seemed to have mysteriously changed. Through March and April the slightest symptoms were taken as proof of infection. In May, the vets in the field found they often had to argue with staff at MAFF's Page Street headquarters before FMD could be confirmed. Official scepticism was even extended to vets who had long and bitter experience of dealing with the disease. On Pywell Farm, near Barnstaple, two South African vets had to threaten to return home before their diagnosis was accepted by MAFF.

In early May, Blair, his ministers and spin doctors went on a publicity blitz through those parts of the countryside that it was safe to encourage the media to visit. Election photo opportunities were staged at tourist attractions. The message was that the countryside was open for business. No longer was Blair to be seen leading from the front in the fight against FMD. That was yesterday's story. At the same time – between 4 May and 12 May – the average number of animals being slaughtered was 32,000 a day. But even assiduous journalists would have struggled to find the figures, as they were hidden in small print on the MAFF website. Dutifully dancing behind Downing Street's lead, the press obligingly told the world the how the English rural economy was recovering. But they only reported from a safe, Potemkin, countryside. The slaughter went on elsewhere.

From 7 June Blair had no interest in FMD. It could no longer hurt his chances of re-election. Besides which, as he wrote in his book: 'blow me, with uncanny, almost unnatural accuracy, the disease peaked, declined and went, almost to the week he [Anderson] had predicted.' However uncanny Anderson's computer was, it is surely not as uncanny as that with all the resources at the disposal of the Prime Minister's office, with all the information flowing in and out of Downing Street, with all the media analysts and spin doctors who were supporting him, that nobody has even told Blair – not even to the present day – that the slaughter went on through the whole summer and into the autumn, with tens of thousands of animals being killed a week. Nothing is quite so uncanny as his ignorance.

The contiguous cull was anything but the great scientific success that the spin doctors presented to the national media. It was a wicked and barbarous policy, driven from the centre, and taking no account of local knowledge or circumstances. It was also illegal. Or at least so Mr Justice Harrison concluded when he gave a ruling in the high court on 21 June 2001, on the case of Rosemary Upton's twelve animals; eleven sheep and one pig. DEFRA had ordered that the animals should be destroyed because Upton had once visited an infected smallholding. But DEFRA's QC did not persuade Mr Justice Harrison with his argument that the department had been given the 'widest possible powers.' Rather, the judge concluded that it was necessary for DEFRA to show that every flock or herd that was killed out had been properly assessed, and that the minister did not have the power to impose a slaughter policy from the centre based on a mere computer model. The Upton case was not unique, but most livestock keepers didn't have the time or resources to fight the government's lawyers. If they had, the courts might have heard little else all summer.

Unfortunately for most of the livestock slaughtered under the contiguous cull the judge's ruling came too late. In any case, it did not stop DEFRA, whose officials continued to slaughter animals illegally. In many cases, it wasn't only the ordering of the slaughter itself that was against the law, but the method too. All too often, in the spring and summer of 2001, the government's agents dealt with farmers' livestock in ways that were both cruel and incompetent. In ways that no respectable farmer would have ordinarily countenanced. Faced with the agents of state power, the farmers were reduced to the status of bullied bystanders. William Norman, of Knowstone Parish Council in Devon, described how the cull was conducted in his area: 'Some cattle spent days roaming around the village when they bolted after an attempted MAFF cull. . . . Some took four or five shots to kill. . . . It was chaos and shambles . . .'

'Chaos and shambles. . .'

 It could be a judgement on the government's handling of FMD in 2001, from first to last.

As the FMD epidemic finally dissipated, many individuals and organisations demanded that it should be investigated by a public inquiry. A full public inquiry, led by an independent chairman vested with judicial powers. An inquiry that would investigate where and how the epidemic started, why the government ignored the Northumberland report's recommendations, and why Blair chose to give Anderson control of the slaughter policy. An inquiry that would have looked into the impact of the contiguous cull, and sought to disentangle the true slaughter figures from MAFF's ever-changing counting methodologies. An inquiry that would have probed the extent of government law breaking, both in ordering the contiguous cull and in carrying it out. Perhaps, above all else, a true public inquiry that would have investigated to what extent – and why – the press officers in Downing Street were allowed to influence policy.

Obviously, under Blair, none of those questions were ever going to be asked out in the open. Instead of a single effective inquiry, the FMD epidemic was commemorated with three, whose evidence was to be presented in secret. Like the three wise monkeys they were allowed to see no evil, hear no evil and speak no evil.

One, under the chairmanship of Sir Don Curry, was solely concerned with the future of farming.

The second was headed by Sir Brian Follett. As a scientific inquiry into the future handling of livestock diseases, any reference to how the epidemic had started and how it had been eradicated was excluded from its brief. While most of Follett's panel were closely associated with the government's scientific advisers, or were trusted New Labour favourites like Suzi Leather, it did have one surprise inclusion. That was Professor Fred Brown. Very unsurprisingly, Follett's report recommended the use of vaccination to control future large outbreaks of FMD.

The third was chaired by Dr Iain Anderson, a Deputy Chairman of British Telecom. It was into the political and administrative handling of the crisis. As Anderson had been an adviser to Blair both before and after the 1997 election, he was hardly going to come down hard on his old friend. To make doubly sure, his support staff were

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seconded from the cabinet office. Even so, the Anderson report did create a few ripples when it was published in July 2002. As Anderson put it in his foreword: 'One finding of this Inquiry has been the extent of the breakdown of trust between many of those affected directly or indirectly and their Government.' A masterly understatement. There are many people in rural communities who will never trust the government or its agents again.

The decision to split those two inquiries – the scientific and the political – was a brilliant piece of obfuscation. As 'Muckspreader' wrote in *Not The Foot and Mouth Report* (a *Private Eye* publication) it seemed: 'particularly perverse, or cleverly calculated . . . [as] . . . the two were so interwoven they could not responsibly be considered separately.' Obviously the last thing anybody in Downing Street wanted was a responsible investigation into the political and scientific management of the crisis.

The FMD epidemic of 2001 was the worst domestic failure of Blair's premiership. It wasn't 'sold' to Parliament and the country in the way that the *causus belli* for the Iraq invasion was sold to Parliament and the country in 2002-03. What was sold in 2001 was a false narrative of where it originated, who was to blame for it, and how competently – and honestly – it was handled. The selling, by Blair and his inner circle, was mind-numbing in its cynicism.

Ten years down the road, it is surely high time that at least some of that false narrative was exposed.

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Brief biographical details and a note on sources.

I am a farmer and occasional writer in north Oxfordshire. I was farming in 2001, though fortunately suffered little in the epidemic. My reasons for writing and publishing this essay are to cast some light on a neglected scandal, and to support my friends in the Associated Swill Users, who are still fighting for justice. I know they are by no means the only people who still bear the scars from the government's handling of FMD in 2001, but they are known to me.

Most of the sources for this essay are mentioned in the text. I believe the only published source not to be mentioned is *Crisis and Opportunity*, the report of the inquiry set up by Devon County Council. The *Private Eye* report has been especially useful. *Private Eye* was the one shining exception to the national media's general failure to hold the government to account in 2001.

Readers are welcome to email me at fmdepidemic2001@gmail.com. I will endeavour to reply, if requested. However, I cannot promise to reply and will certainly only reply to correspondents who give a clear and identifiable name (no cyber-grunt-speak handles).

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