

The Singapore Saga Revisited

*Singapore's experience of the COVID-19 crisis shows us exactly why the UK government needs to safeguard our food security as a matter of post-Brexit policy, writes CIB chairman **Edward Spalton**. We must not become overly-dependent on imports for our food supply, or a crisis like the current pandemic could leave us suffering from crippling shortages.*

Sometimes it takes a long time to discern coincidence – and sometimes it bounces back to hit you in the face. Having celebrated Brexit in Parliament Square on 31st January with our daughter, she left for Singapore on business the following day, returning a week or so later.

Completely unconnected with that, I wrote an article on Singapore's food security, which appeared on the CIB website on 9th March. It acknowledged the tremendous achievement of the Singapore economy, pointing out that it was the result of vigorous, active government leadership and tight regulation – rather than of Thatcherite laissez faire free trade. In particular, I pointed out that Singapore's reliance on imports for 90% of its food supply was not something to which any would-be independent state should actively aspire – although an influential British government adviser appeared to think it was highly desirable for the UK post-Brexit .

In the last few days I heard of a phone call from a distressed lady in Singapore, complaining of food shortages and empty shelves in the supermarkets. I had one of those "I told you so" moments. So I thought I had better dig a little deeper.

The interruption in food supplies was due to the fact that Malaysia had closed its borders to prevent a further spread of coronavirus. Whilst Malaysia and Singapore separated in 1965,

they have close economic ties and some 300,000 people a day normally cross the border between the two. If Malaysian labour is no longer available, some Singapore businesses will have to relocate to Malaysia.

The government has assured citizens that it has persuaded firms to build up stocks of food for the last two months and that there are ample supplies, provided people do not start panic buying – although there may be less choice. Sounds a bit familiar, doesn't it?

As a densely populated city state, it is unlikely that Singapore would ever have been entirely self-sufficient in food, but the present huge imbalance is largely a result of its industrial success. Land covered by factories does not grow crops. One commentator remarked as long ago as 2012 that, in the Sixties, the state had some 20,000 farms occupying 14,000 hectares of land (more like what we would call market gardens than farms), but most of them had been obliterated by development.

The Singapore government is not just responding to the emergency of the moment. It has been facing up to the realities of its situation for many years, developing its regulatory system to maximum advantage. Last year the Ministry of the Environment and Water Resources combined the Agri Food and Veterinary Authority, the National Environment Agency and the Health Sciences Authority into one new body, the Singapore Food Agency – which gives some idea of the priority. Singapore is a food manufacturing and processing economy as well as an entrepôt (transshipment) port.

The government wants to assure its own citizens and foreign customers that all foods made in or handled through Singapore are produced to the highest standards of hygiene and safety. Skim reading suggests that these methods of control are broadly at least as stringent as those of the EU.

The Singapore Food Agency with some 850 staff also engages in agricultural, horticultural and marine research, developing plant varieties, techniques and methods which it can license to partners in supplier countries, thus creating long-lasting and stable relationships rather than simply buying commodities on a hand to mouth basis. One of the objectives is to avoid over-reliance on any one country or group of countries for supplies of food. There is also a potential for selling the products of this know-how to other countries.

So if it attains its ambitions, Singapore could become an agricultural exporter by proxy through such partnership arrangements. One gets the impression that there is plenty of determination to do so.