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About the Author

[Dr Mark Roodhouse](#) is Reader in Modern History at the University of York, working on the economic and social history of modern Britain. His particular interest is in the history of black markets, underground economies and the informal sector. He is the author of [Black Market Britain, 1939-1955](#) (OUP, 2013), 'Rationing,' in Dale Southerton, *Encyclopedia of Consumer Culture* (SAGE Publications, 2011), and 'Popular Morality and the Black Market in Britain, 1939-55' in *Food and Conflict in Europe in the Age of the Two World Wars* (Basingstoke, 2006) edited by Frank Trentmann and Flemming Just. This memorandum draws upon his work on rationing, price control and black markets. He is also the author of an opinion piece 'Ocado for all - lessons from Second World War transport logistics' and a policy paper 'Call it what it is - supermarket rationing' both published on the *History & Policy* website. In 2007 and 2008, he was involved in assessing the feasibility of personal carbon rationing. He wrote a policy paper 'Rationing returns: a solution to global warming?' for *History & Policy* and an opinion piece 'Enlist the Blitz Spirit, Get Out the Carbon Ration Book' for the *Financial Times*. He also submitted [written evidence](#) to the Environmental Audit Committee.

Summary

- Price fixes, product restrictions and special opening hours imposed in March 2020 are an historically novel form of rationing in which the state delegates responsibility for food rationing to private business.
- The resultant state-sponsored informal rationing is supplemented by emergency food aid from government and food banks.
- Civil contingency and business continuity planners arrived at the current approach in the 2000s without input from small independent retailers, trade unions, consumer organisations or patient groups.
- Without this input, planners took a pessimistic, top-down view of consumer and worker behaviour that focused on panic buyers, skiving workers, shoplifters, looters, and rioters that clouded official and popular understanding of the impact of COVID-19 on the UK food system.
- While a necessary and appropriate response to a short three-month civil emergency, the inherent inequities and inefficiencies of this approach make it unsustainable were the crisis to worsen or continue for longer.

1. Introduction

- 1.1. Price fixes, product restrictions and special opening hours imposed in March 2020 are an historically novel form of rationing in which the UK government delegates responsibility for feeding the nation during a prolonged UK-wide civil emergency to major food retailers and suppliers.

- 1.2. Faced with disruption of a similar or greater magnitude during the twentieth century, the UK government imposed formal food rationing schemes run by a Ministry of Food.
- 1.3. Both are forms of rationing but the public has struggled to appreciate this because popular memory of the Second World War leads them to think of rationing as synonymous with government allocating consumers a fixed allowance of essential but scarce foodstuffs.
- 1.4. Comparing and contrasting today's supermarket rationing with twentieth-century government rationing schemes reveals both the strengths and weaknesses of the current approach taken to feeding the people during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Food Rationing in Twentieth-Century Britain

- 2.1. In response to localised food shortages caused by supply chain disruption, falling food imports due to submarine warfare, and reduced domestic production during the First World War, the UK government introduced a state-controlled food rationing scheme in early 1918. This replaced informal rationing of their customers by retailers and suppliers, which was itself a response to the government's failure to persuade people to limit their food in early 1917.
- 2.2. Retailers and suppliers rationed customers using a variety of methods that bear comparison with actions taken in response to COVID-19 induced shortages. These included:
 - a. Increasing retail prices to ration people by purse;
 - b. Adopting the principle of first-come-first-served;
 - c. Prioritising existing customers over new ones to ration;
 - d. Prioritising higher-spending existing customers over lower-spending ones;
 - e. Restrictions on what products customers could buy;
 - f. Quantity limits per purchase of a restricted item; and
 - g. Spending limits per purchase of a restricted item.
- 2.3. Rationing by the purse and queue were the most popular methods with retailers and suppliers. This was inequitable and inefficient system that failed to ensure every civilian had enough to eat with the poorest and the vulnerable unable to access food.
- 2.4. Civilians expressed their frustration and anger at the resultant shortages, queues and rising prices through public protests against 'food hogs' and 'food profiteers'. Physical and verbal assaults on shopworkers and fellow shoppers was not unknown. Retail crime increased with the press reporting incidents reporters described as rioting and looting.
- 2.5. Under the new government rationing scheme, every civilian received a fixed share of available supplies of basic foodstuffs at a reasonable price. Public unrest dissipated and food queues disappeared within weeks. The absence of food queues in Spring 1918 likely slowed the spread of 'Spanish flu' during the influenza pandemic. The controls ended in 1921.

- 2.6. As a result of First World War experience, the UK government registered civilians, fixed food prices, subsidised producers and rationed food in short order once the Second World War started. The public welcomed the scheme and observed its strictures. Although people avoided and evaded the regulations, this did not threaten the scheme's integrity. Not only did it ensure people had enough to eat but it also improved diets with lifelong health benefits for the young.
- 2.7. Formal rationing of this kind is not an historical relic. In 2008 the Labour government commissioned a series of feasibility studies of personal carbon trading that sought to update rationing for the digital age. Policymakers concluded that carbon rationing was technically feasible but politically unpalatable – an idea ahead of its time. Civil contingency and business continuity planners reached a similar conclusion about formal rationing during a rising tide emergency in 2006.

3. Food Rationing in Today's Britain

- 3.1. Where informal supermarket rationing today differs from informal rationing during the First World War is the direct involvement of the state. As far as the Environment Secretary is concerned 'supermarkets are best placed to judge what stock limits they should place on their particular product lines'. The role of government is to support retailers through the DEFRA Food Chain Emergency Liaison Group (FCELG) and ad hoc meetings with major retailers and suppliers.
- 3.2. This is best seen in the ways that government is supporting business by:
 - a. Relaxing competition laws to enable them to pool resources
 - b. Extending delivery hours to stores and working hours for drivers to increase deliveries
 - c. Offsetting increased staffing costs (e.g. bonuses, sick pay and additional staff) with a business rate tax break
- 3.3. While this system is working for the majority of the population, anecdotal evidence suggests key workers, the economically vulnerable and the clinically vulnerable are struggling to obtain food.
 - a. Time and resource constraints prevent key workers purchasing food in store or online.
 - b. The same is true of the economically vulnerable whose number has been swollen by business closures.
 - c. This also applies to the clinically vulnerable who may also be physically incapable of shopping in-store or unwilling to risk infection by doing so, and unable to get a home delivery slot.
- 3.4. The government is tackling in these problems in one of four ways:
 - a. Sharing shielded patient lists with retailers to enable prioritisation of delivery slots;
 - b. Communal feeding of key workers, their children and vulnerable children through work and school canteens;
 - c. Food parcels delivered to those shielding and self-isolating; and,
 - d. Arranging personal shoppers for those shielding.

- 3.5. While these measures provide some help for key workers and clinically vulnerable patients, they provide little succour for the economically vulnerable who turn to food banks. What measures have been taken to ensure their food security, have been taken by HM Treasury and Department for Work and Pensions.
- 3.6. Laying out current arrangements for feeding the people through informal rationing and food aid in this way gives a spurious sense of a well designed and thought through system. This is not the case.
- 3.7. Civil contingency and business continuity flu pandemic plans first sketched for DEFRA in 2006 by Dr Helen Peck focused on supply chain disruption due to domestic labour shortages and associated public disorder. They did not go beyond the measures outlined in 3.1 and 3.2 introduced a week later than the food industry wanted according to reports in *The Grocer*.
- 3.8. Smaller retailers and suppliers, trade unions, consumer organisations, food charities and patient groups did not contribute to these plans but have been increasingly vocal in their criticism of the way they have been implemented.
- 3.9. Nevertheless, the outlines of an effective system for feeding people during this rising tide civil emergency have emerged thanks to the efforts of government, business and civil society groups.

4. The Origins of Supermarket Rationing

- 4.1. When compared to twentieth-century food rationing, the current approach to feeding the people during a prolonged civil emergency is an historical novelty. State-backed informal rationing by major retailers and suppliers supplemented by communal feeding and food aid from the public and charitable sector combines aspects of that experience in an unprecedented way.
- 4.2. Blurring the lines between formal and informal rationing, this experiment reflects thinking captured in the 2006 Peck Report published under a New Labour administration. It was part of a thorough-going overhaul of civil contingency planning initiated in the early 2000s after a series of creeping crises. Five of these crises exposed the fragility of the UK food system: the Y2K problem (1999), fuel protests (2000), foot-and-mouth (2001), SARS (2002-4) and Avian Flu (2003)
- 4.3. As a result of these same crises, major food retailers and suppliers devoted an increasing amount of attention to business continuity planning and worked with government to draw up the plans implemented in late March 2020. Smaller independent retailers and suppliers played a limited role in planning. Consumer and worker representatives were not consulted.
- 4.4. The lack of wider consultation is readily explicable. Looking for a national solution to feeding people during a civil emergency, central government partnered with major retailers and suppliers whose UK-wide reach and vertical integration from dockside and farmgate to shop shelves. This was a necessity not a choice after several decades of policies directed at regulating a market-driven food system.
- 4.5. The absence of other voices from emergency planning since 2006 goes some way to explaining the pessimistic view planners took of consumer and worker behaviour,

and early analyses of that behaviour after lockdown. When it came to shoppers, reasonable worst-case scenarios envisaged panic buying, looting and even rioting. In workers' case, it was absenteeism rather than presentism that was the anticipated problem. These ideas baked into planning documents led some to blame irrational panic buyers for shortages.

- 4.6. Laying in stocks to ensure a two-week supply of food was a rational response to government guidance on self-isolation. When combined with holiday cancellations and more people eating in, shortages developed as precarious just-in-time supply chains struggle to respond to an unanticipated uplift in demand. This created a downward spiral in which shoppers over-bought goods in short supply or near substitutes. Again, this was a rational and predictable consumer response to the supply situation.
- 4.7. This is one example of how preconceived ideas shared by a narrow group of civil contingency and business continuity planners have hindered understanding of the current situation and the response to it. Others include the lack of attention that planners paid to international supply chains which are of particular importance to the UK food system or the particular needs of the economically and clinically vulnerable.

5. General Conclusions

- 5.1. Current price fixes, product restrictions and special opening are an historically novel form of rationing in which the state delegates responsibility for food rationing to private business.
- 5.2. The resultant state-sponsored informal rationing does not work well for all key workers, the economically vulnerable or the clinically vulnerable. It is, therefore, supplemented by communal feeding, food aid and state benefits.
- 5.3. The deficiencies of this emergency food system problems reflect a lack of input from small independent retailers, trade unions, consumer organisations or patient groups.
- 5.4. These deficiencies need addressing to ensure everyone's food security and head off public discontent that might sink current arrangements should the current food crisis lengthen or deepen just as did during the First World War.

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