

COMMENT & ANALYSIS

Welcome to the brave new world of risk-obsessed politics



BILL DURODIE

IT would require an iron will to stand in the face of today's febrile culture and oppose the wave of countries rapidly withdrawing Japanese foodstuffs from their shelves "in line with the precautionary approach", as a Singapore Government spokesperson put it.

Having alerted the world to elevated levels of radiation in food items such as spinach and milk, as well as doses twice the recommended limit for babies in drinking water in Tokyo, the Japanese government has no-one other than itself to blame.

After coping admirably in managing the immediate aftermath of the earthquake and tsunami, it seems that the authorities may score an own goal at the level of communication.

Chief Cabinet Secretary Yukio Edano has asked international importers to take a "logical stance" over the situation. They will. Unfortunately, it is not the logic he may have had in mind. "Even if these foods are temporarily eaten, there is no health hazard," he advised. Others have indicated that one would have to drink a lot of the water before being harmed. Drinking the water in Tokyo for a year might expose you to an additional 0.8mSv (millisieverts) of radiation. But then living in some of the places on Earth where the natural background radiation is above the norm could easily expose you to 10 times as much.

Needless to say, people continue to live in such areas — and have babies. In fact, there is a considerable body of evidence to suggest that — if anything — their longevity may be enhanced through such exposure. After all, biological life emerged into an environment that had far more radiation, from the ground and from space, than it does today.

Eating spinach non-stop for a year would give you a radiation dose equivalent to about one CT scan. Drinking milk endlessly would be even less of a problem.

So where did it all go wrong for Mr Edano? Where did the army of over-zealous officials wanting to ban things on a pre-

cautionary basis come from? Should we blame the United States for starting the cascade? Or was it the media who irresponsibly amplified concerns?

In fact, if we truly hope to understand the confusions now emerging over the situation regarding food from Japan, there is little point in looking there, or even trying to understand nuclear accidents and radiation, or the role of today's nervous officials and the media.

Rather, since the end of the Cold War in 1989, the world has steadily been reorganised along the principle that it is better to be safe than sorry. That sounds eminently sensible. But is it true? Is there not a point where safety comes at a cost to other areas of life? For instance, if we were to put all our resources into combating terrorism there would be none left to deal with disease.

Risk management is always about such trade-offs. But the mantra that we should be as safe as possible and always take precautionary measures whenever possible has become good coin among bureaucratic elites the world over.

This provided governments with a new role once the old Soviet enemy had imploded. Noting too that the end of the old-style confrontational politics had also left people rather more isolated and insecure, politicians refashioned themselves as the people's protectors of last resort.

This has come at a tremendous cost to society — leaders driven more by events than by principles, and populations that are used to having their prejudices pandered to rather than challenged.

The rot, of course, started at the top. Hence witness a large number of foreign nationals in Japan, many of whom were caught up in these tumultuous events, and who wanted to stay behind to help their friends and loved ones. They even wanted to help complete strangers — but of course we now know, because we have been brought up to believe so, that strangers are a danger anyway.

So, rather than pursuing their humane instincts, according to their own assessment of what the real risks were, many such individuals were advised, by their own national governments, to get out. Get out of

the region. Get out of Tokyo. Get out of Japan.

In the past, people who ran away from people in need, particularly when these were people they knew, might have been accused of being cowards. Today, we call that taking precautionary measures.

Welcome to the brave new

world of risk-obsessed politics. Far from building character and making populations more resilient as the leaders of some of these countries constantly profess themselves to be doing, what we find is a highly-confused culture that encourages a febrile response, both on the ground, and many thousands of miles away.

It is this that will be the greatest problem for the wider Japanese population for some time to come. ■

Bill Durodie is Senior Fellow, Centre for Non-Traditional Security Studies, S Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University.

THANK YOU FOR LOVING OUR
PAN PIZZA
FOR THE PAST 30 YEARS

"The crust's so crispy, I can eat it by itself."
Zheng Liang

"I love sinking my teeth into the soft inside."
Esther Fang

"Plenty of toppings and cheese. What's there not to love?"
Jacklyn Hsu

"It's fluffy, tasty and crunchy. Yum!"
Shiella Christy

"It's easy to get friends over. I just order a Pan Pizza."
Kevin Seah

"The Pan Pizza never fails to fill me up!"
Kenneth Chia

HERE'S 30% MORE CHEESE TO SHOW OUR APPRECIATION.

It takes more than a great recipe to keep our Pan Pizza well-loved for 30 years. It calls for the skilful hands of a dough master to get that signature crust — crispy on the outside, soft and fluffy on the inside. To show our appreciation of your love, we're adding 30% more cheese to any Pan Pizza for a limited period. So here's to that familiar, golden-brown goodness. One that's bound to bring you and your loved ones together.

Share a slice of life

Pizzahutsingapore Pizzahut_sg

Restaurant locations: Ang Mo Kio • Bedok North • Bukit Panjang Plaza • Bukit Timah Plaza • City Square Mall • Changi Airport T1 • Clementi • Compass Point Shopping Centre • Funan DigitalLife Mall • Greenridge Shopping Centre • HarbourFront Centre • Hougang Mall • Junction 8 Shopping Centre • Jurong Point Shopping Centre • Kovan Heartland Mall • Lot 1 Shoppers' Mall • Lucky Plaza • Marina Square • Nex • Plaza Singapura • Siglap • Suntec City Mall • Tampines Mall • Thomson Plaza • Toa Payoh