

Speech: Michael Gove on tackling food waste

I told my wonderful private secretary Hannah that I was going to come on immediately after a rap video. I thought 'Ben, you have excelled yourself'.

You really do have the conveying power of a very special genius. But of course, the rap video that we have watched is not a pounding beat from the streets.

It's an emotional cry from the heart on behalf of WRAP, an magnificent charity who is run by Marcus Gover and others, which has done so much to compel government, businesses and individuals to recognise the role that they can play in making sure we have a more circular economy and more respectful of the resources that the earth has given us.

It is particularly appropriate when we're thinking about food that we should be here in the V&A. It's not just the case that Tristram, under his leadership, has increased the number of people coming into the V&A, and his latest exhibition opening this evening, 'Bigger than the Plate', is set to be one of the most successful that the V&A has ever put on.

It's also the case that those of you who are as old as I am will remember from the early 1980s when the V&A was marketed to tourists.

The line behind that marketing slogan was a piece of history that I learned about just over lunch. Actually during that great period of Victorian Institute building, the V&A, the Science Museum and the Natural History Museum were being built.

There was actually a Food Museum here on the side. One of the reasons why there was a Food Museum because it's through food that we understand so much about ourselves.

The exhibition that is being put on here, 'Bigger than the Plate', reflects on how modern day designers are using food in order to send messages on who we are and our place in creation.

But all of us recognise that food influences and shapes, and is essential for our lives in so many ways. Of course we need food to literally stay alive, but food is also one of the ways in which our senses are delighted. It's one of the ways that the creative impulse within us is given expression.

Cooking is a form of magic. The application of heat, salt and fat can transform ingredients into something sublime. It is also the case that through food, our priorities as a society are reflected.

So at times of strength and times when we're tested, it is by sharing food and by making room for others around our table that we show our love and affection, our respect and care for others.

But also when we produce our food it says a great deal about us and what we value. And as Emily has reminded us in her remarks, the way in which we produce our food at the moment is preferred. We use water and irrigation in a way which is scornful of the limits that this earth has placed on all of us in order to grow our food.

Our food is transported in refrigerated lorries using chemicals which themselves have an impact on our environment.

Our food is also a growth for the application of fertilisers and other chemicals in a way that certainly improves yield, but also has an impact on the carbon content of the soil and the health of our rivers.

So everything about the way our food has been produced suggests a degree of extravagance, but perhaps even heedlessness about the consequences of our generation of abundance.

And it's not just the way which our food is produced. It's also the way in which our food is distributed. There are people in this room who have done wonders to bring delicious food at a competitive price onto the table of millions.

In so doing, you have reminded us that the market performs a million miracles every day. But it is also the case that there are millions in this country who go hungry. Whose diets are simply not good enough in order to give them the full physical health and the deep mental wellbeing that they need in order to live full lives.

So in reduction and distribution, the way in which we handle food reminds us of some of the flaws in our society and some of the challenges in our world.

And that is where food waste comes in, because food waste is the product of this. And food waste also symbolises the inequity in distribution.

And that is why I'm so delighted that Ben has taken on the role of Food Waste Champion – because in so doing he is helping all of us in this room and beyond, to play a critical part in a role which advances both economic justice and environmental justice.

Environmental justice in that if all of us are more careful in the food that we use, more thoughtful in the resources that we deploy, then we can ensure that we do tread more lightly on this planet. We use less water, less fluorinated gases, that we use less fuel and we deploy less energy in the generation of food.

But also, that there is less pollution, and land can be used in a way which is more sparing of all of our resources and therefore more effective in ensuring that we can win the fight against climate change.

So reducing our excessive demand on this earth's resources is a critical thing to do, and using food wisely and taking food waste seriously is part of that. But also distribution as well: this government has made available £15 million in order to ensure that we help the private sector to redistribute

surplus food which is edible and nutritious and delicious to those most in need.

So cafes, retailers and other can ensure that at the end of the day that food can be collected by wonderful charities like the Felix Project and then taken to those who need it. And this practical redistribution of resource shows also that we value the food that we've produced – we don't regard it simply as something to be discarded at the end of the day. We regard it as something created with care that can bring happiness, support and necessary relief to others who are in need.

So food waste is both a way of showing that we respect the earth and its limits, and it is also, by taking it seriously, a way of showing that we respect our fellow human beings and their potential.

Of course there's a danger sometimes, when we talk about food waste, that it can seem as though we're being punitive, Calvinist even, that we're determining in a joyless sense the man in Whitehall knows best exactly how you should eat and exactly what you should do with every last ingredient.

Well I don't believe, actually, that tackling food waste need be seen in that way at all. If you look back at the history of food – shepherd's pie, bubble and squeak, oxtail's soup – all of these are the consequences of past chefs, past cooks, taking food waste seriously and being determined to use every aspect of what the earth has created.

Nobody can say that Fergus Henderson, the Chef at St John responsible for nose to tail eating – nobody can say that he was a joyless individual, who didn't communicate the sheer savour and relish of someone who loves their food. To visit that restaurant, to hear him speak, is to know he is someone who is a natural communicator of the joy that food can bring.

So it's also the case that taking food seriously, and taking food waste seriously, is also a way of celebrating human ingenuity, of celebrating culinary originality, of celebrating the great chefs so many of whom played such a wonderful part earlier in showing what we can do with the ingredients that others would throw away.

So during the course of this afternoon, you have an opportunity to discuss the action that we can take and the example that we can set. And I do believe that Marcus and the team at WRAP, and Ben, and the work that he has done, remind us exactly what we should do.

We should make sure that we measure, as far as possible, the food waste that we generate. We should make sure that companies are accountable of the way in which they husband natural resources. We should seek to raise awareness at every point, and to educate every single one of our citizens about how we use food more responsibly.

But above all, what we should do is we should celebrate food and what it means in all our lives. Food is a source of joy to so many, something precious that we should hate to waste it, and also a way of showing as I

underlined earlier, that we care for our planet, we care for our fellow citizens, and we care about the future.

Thank you all very much.