

## 21047 Meatless school menu sparks political row in France

Jon Henley, *The Guardian*, 24<sup>th</sup> February 2021

A decision by the Green mayor of Lyon, seen by many as the country's culinary capital, to temporarily take meat off the menu in school canteens during the coronavirus pandemic has sparked a major political row in France.

Government ministers have accused the mayor of "ideological" and "elitist" behaviour after the measure came into force in Lyon's schools.

The city council has said the decision to provide the same meatless four-course lunch was purely practical, arguing physical distancing rules necessitated more sittings in school canteens and it could not serve 29,000 children in two hours if there was a choice of meat and vegetarian menus.

Food represents roughly a quarter of France's carbon footprint and proposals are being developed by the government to encourage the French both to eat more local produce and to consume less meat, but of higher quality.

But resistance to any proposals to reduce meat consumption will be fierce from France's powerful farming lobby. The Lyon decision was met with protest outside the city hall.

The Lyon city council has promised canteens will offer a meat option again as soon as restrictions are relaxed and pupils have more time to eat, also pointing out that the temporary menus are not vegetarian, but contain fish and eggs.

But that has not stopped some ministers from France's centrist government jumping on the decision. "This is absurd from a nutritional point of view, and a scandal from a social point of view. Let's stop putting ideology on our children's plates," said the agriculture minister, who asked the region's *Préfet* to overrule the move.

The conservative interior minister also criticised what he called a "scandalous ideology", describing the decision as "an unacceptable insult to France's farmers and butchers". "It is clear that the Greens' moralising and elitist policies excluded low-income people. For many children, the school canteen is the only place where they get to eat meat," he said.

In a rare display of disagreement within the cabinet, however, the environment minister said that schools should offer a daily vegetarian menu option and called the Lyon debate "prehistoric". The health minister also said he did not find a menu with neither meat nor fish shocking.

President Emmanuel Macron has so far sidestepped the row. He said that schools should aim for "a complete model of nutrition" and that "quality meat" was produced in France. But the row foreshadows broader political battles to come.