

## Calls for return of Churchill's national restaurant service to tackle food inequality

Eve Livingston, *The Guardian*, 31 August, 2024

In 1940s Britain, at a time before fast food and ready meals were staples of the British high street and in a country struggling to deal with the ramifications of war, a popular new restaurant chain was established.

It served high-quality meals at reasonable prices, attracted customers from the full spectrum of British society, and grew at a rate of 10 new sites a week at its most popular. The brains behind the operation? The

5 British government, led by the prime minister, Winston Churchill.

Churchill's British Restaurants, a chain of government-funded canteens offering nutritious price-capped meals, were intended to counter inflation in food and fuel prices related to the war, as well as to boost community spirit. At their peak, there were more British Restaurants across the UK than there are branches of McDonald's or Wetherspoons today.

10 Now a new report is calling for the return of a "national restaurant service" in some form, as a way to tackle contemporary issues such as health inequality, food insecurity and even climate change in the UK. A forthcoming report entitled *Public diners: the idea whose time has come*, by food policy NGO Nourish Scotland, marks the beginning of a campaign to introduce restaurants as a new piece of national infrastructure, a call backed by politicians and experts.

15 A public diner, according to the report, is a state-subsidised eatery serving quality and ethically produced food at affordable prices. Crucially, says Nourish Scotland, they are neither charity nor a treat, but rather everyday eating places for entire communities to access.

"For other aspects of our wellbeing—water, transport, healthcare, even wifi—we have built the public infrastructure to ensure that everyone has quality, universal access. We are missing that in relation to food,"  
20 said Abigail McCall, project officer at Nourish Scotland.

"Poor diets have overtaken smoking as the leading cause of preventable ill health for some time now. We need the government to make a bold intervention in our food environment, and invest in delivering what the market doesn't: healthy, climate-friendly food in a convenient way and at an affordable price.

"The creation of public infrastructure is a big undertaking but we have done it before. We created public  
25 railways, parks and libraries. It can be done and it's easy to see how the diners would pay off given the impact our food has on our health, our environment and our communities."

The call for a chain of public diners is backed by experts including Dr Christian Reynolds, researcher at the Centre for Food Policy at City, University of London and a global expert in food waste and sustainable diet. "British Restaurants were an effective solution to provide access to good food during the second world war,"  
30 he said.

"Today, Nourish Scotland's proposed public diners—state subsidised, affordable restaurants—make sense in 2024. The model [this report] suggests provides positive benefits in terms of health, local economic support and sustainability outcomes."

Last year hospital data showed the number of patients in England and Wales being treated for nutritional  
35 deficiencies had tripled in a decade while a January 2024 survey by the Food Foundation found 20% of UK households with children reported experiencing food insecurity.

And, Nourish Scotland says, ingredients could be sourced from organic farms, reducing unsustainable food production practices and food waste, and stimulating local economies.

Public diners have already been realised elsewhere in the world. In Poland, government-funded "milk  
40 bars" (*bar mleczny*) gained popularity in the communist era as a way to serve traditional home-cooked food at low prices, and remain numerous today.

Singapore's "hawker centres", market-style community dining rooms, emerged as part of the nation's urban redevelopment following independence, and bring an array of street sellers under one roof to ensure vendors' access to ingredients and space, as well as food hygiene standards and choice for consumers.

45 The call for state-subsidised dining in the UK comes amid a growing international movement for public restaurants as key infrastructure.

Former *New York Times* food writer Mark Bittman, now a global leader in food culture and policy and the founder of non-profit restaurant chain Community Kitchen, described the plan as "brilliant" and "executable".