



# The Pelletier Column

## The best of both worlds

by Christophe Pelletier



Several years ago, one of the first presentations I made had the title “Back to the Future or Forward to the Past?” To this day, I still wonder which direction we are heading.

The past is everywhere it seems. On the consumers’ side, there is a growing desire for food and

farming like they believe it was made in the past. Call it authentic, natural, and old-fashioned or any other name that appeals to consumers, many people certainly have the past in mind when they make their food choices. This nostalgia of things that never really were, as I call it, is not a new phenomenon. It comes in cycles and it is more a reflection and a reaction of a general malaise about how the present world is perceived.

Of course, at the same time, consumers expect a level of food safety that today’s technology offers. They would not want to buy the same old food borne diseases. They want the best of both worlds; it is a fair expectation.

### We long for what we fear is about to be lost

Sometimes we want to part with the past and embrace novelty and progress, sometimes we long for what we fear is about to be lost. The further away from the equilibrium the pendulum goes, the harder it swings back in the other direction, and often it swings back too far. The polarisation of the debate on food and farming is just another expression of the magnitude of the pendulum swings.

The back and forth between future and past is not just in consumers markets, though. There is hardly any week without some research paper on farming by some university “rediscovering” what our forefathers knew from experience about sustainability and preserving resources, although back then the science was not advanced enough to explain what they knew.

Even in summits and conferences where the world elite likes to gather among peers, there seems to have been a renewed awareness about the importance of proper water management and of healthy soils lately. I would have thought that it was a given for anyone remotely involved in food and agriculture.

Sometimes, I have a feeling that we are disconnected with Nature. Perhaps increased wealth and comfort has made us think that we could extract ourselves from our biological nature. Then, it is quite fortunate that the threats and challenges that we are facing act as a wake-up call. Hopefully, we will be able to get up on the right foot and do the right thing, too. Our biological nature is not

just about our physical interaction and dependence with Nature. That would be too rational and too easy to deal with, I suppose.

Our nature contains both the emotional and the psychological. It adds quite another dimension of subjectivity that is more challenging to manage. The discrepancy between the emotional and the rational is certainly one of the main causes of tension between different groups and opinions. It expresses itself in many ways. There has always been a tension between tradition and modernity, as there is also between comfort zone and change.

Some will be more conservatives and others will be more adventurous and it is often difficult to find a consensus between such different adaptive behaviours towards the future. If that was not complicated enough, the way the programming that we all follow in our different cultures to perceive and deal with the outside world makes it even more difficult to reconcile different points of views in a global perspective.

Nonetheless, the psychological element is there, like it or not. We cannot ignore it and we cannot deny it. For the future, I believe it is probably a bigger challenge than finding new technologies to solve problems. The trick will be to manage the psychological to lead towards effective solutions and shape a world in which we have a future.

### There are useful lessons to be learned from the past

There are many useful lessons to be learned from the past, just as there are useful ones from the present. We must learn from them and use them to prevent repeating the same mistakes. It will be useful to mix past, present and a future vision to mix past experience with new knowledge and new tools and to rethink how we could rebuild our systems from scratch by eliminating unnecessary baggage and increase their effectiveness.

Just like in the human brain, we have to find ways to connect both hemispheres and build a bridge between the poles. Our future and current leadership must manage this fluid and grey area so that we use all of the potential within our societies, our histories and ourselves to build the foundation of a solid future. For everything that is polarised, getting the best and eliminating the worst of both worlds is the way to go, unless we want humanity to end up bipolar.

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Christophe Pelletier is a food and agriculture strategist and futurist from Canada. He works internationally. He has published two books on feeding the world’s growing population. His blog is called “The Food Futurist”.