EDDIE MAIR:
Would you back a horse if you knew it had a one per cent chance of winning a race? Would you eat a beef product if you knew there was a one per cent chance of it containing horse meat? A whole pile of test results this week hasn’t diminished the concern about the providence of our food. And if you think horse meat is distasteful, what about the spectacle of suppliers, supermarkets and politicians increasingly blaming each other for this state of affairs? The Sun yesterday castigated “cowardly retailers” saying they’re still “ducking the key questions”. Well Malcolm Walker is Chief Executive of the supermarket chain Iceland and he’s here to answer questions. Good morning to you.

MALCOLM WALKER:
Good morning.
EDDIE MAIR:
When you see these disputes between politicians and supermarkets, where do you think the key responsibility lies?

MALCOLM WALKER:
Well supermarkets are visible because they’re on the high street, but supermarkets shouldn’t be blamed. British supermarkets have got a fantastic reputation for food safety; they go to enormous lengths to protect their brand. If we’re going to blame somebody, let’s start with local authorities because there’s a whole side to this industry which is invisible. That’s the catering industry. Schools, hospitals, it’s massive business for cheap food and local authorities award contracts based purely on one thing: price. So if you’re looking to blame somebody who’s driving down food quality, it’s invisible. It’s schools, it’s hospitals, it’s prisons, it’s local authorities who are driving this down.

EDDIE MAIR:
So is your message don’t worry so much about the stuff you take home and cook yourself, but be extra vigilant because you don’t know what you’re eating outside the home?

MALCOLM WALKER:
Supermarkets carry out an enormous range of testing procedures on every product that bears their name. And, okay, you can say we haven’t been testing for horse. Well why would we? We don’t test for hedgehog either. I mean we stand by our products. At Iceland, we’ve had no horse meat in any of our products and I don’t believe actually supermarkets have either. Because we’re talking about two different things here: we’re talking about horse meat - or flesh - and contamination. Anybody who’s passing off horse meat, horse carcasses cut up and sold into the industry, that is not going to the supermarket business. But because it’s out there in the supply chain and in some of the factories, you’re getting minute amounts of contamination.

EDDIE MAIR:
You’re joking, I take it, about hedgehog. But three weeks ago people would have assumed you were joking about horse meat in our food.
MALCOLM WALKER:
Well exactly. I mean …

EDDIE MAIR:
Well however miniscule the amount, we want to know that it’s there and that the systems are in place to stop it.

MALCOLM WALKER:
It’s not there. There is no horse meat in any supermarket products. You’re talking about contamination of microscopic amounts, and that’s there because some rogue suppliers have been using their factories to process horse meat for other purposes and it certainly hasn’t been going to supermarkets.

EDDIE MAIR:
Is there ever going to be a system whereby we can be absolutely sure where every product has come from and be able to trace it back to source, or is that just nuts?

MALCOLM WALKER:
No, you’ve got it now for the vast majority of products. I mean again supermarkets normally sell three levels of quality products. They’ll have the premium brand, the standard brand and then the white label or economy brand, which is made to a price, and that’s the one that people should be looking at. But all the ingredients are clearly labelled on the back of the packet what’s in there. Iceland has never sold economy products. We do not sell cheap food. We have one brand of food, one level of food. That’s what we sell. We know where all our food comes from. We follow the supply chain right the way through, and it’s very short. Our ready meals, the majority of them are made in our own factory. The meat for that factory comes from our own cutting house. The meat to the cutting house comes from farms in Wales. We know where our meat comes from.

EDDIE MAIR:
The boss of Waitrose in the papers today casting aspersions on cheap food, perhaps the sort of value products you’re talking about. Would you eat other supermarkets’
value products?

MALCOLM WALKER:
Personally I wouldn’t eat value supermarket products because they won’t contain much meat. There’ll be other things in there whether it’s rusk or whether it’s filler or whatever it is. But we don’t sell …

EDDIE MAIR:
(over) But what about people who can’t afford otherwise?

MALCOLM WALKER:
… we don’t sell white label or economy products. We just have one level.

EDDIE MAIR:
(over) No, you made that point. I’m just wondering what happens … If you have a choice of which level of food you’re going to eat, that’s fine; but for people on a budget - and there are plenty of those - what do they do?

MALCOLM WALKER:
Well there’s nothing wrong with those products. I’m just saying that the real culprits in this, it’s the catering industry. These dodgy cutting houses and backstreet manufacturers have been supplying product to the catering industry, and a lot of that is being bought by local authorities for schools and hospitals. That’s where the problem really lies, not with supermarkets.

EDDIE MAIR:
What other action would you like from central government?

MALCOLM WALKER:
I don’t see what they can do. We’re talking about one or two rogue suppliers. The police I understand have raided these premises. They’ll be stopped and that will stop the supply coming into the … going into the food chain.

EDDIE MAIR:
Alright, thanks very much indeed.

INTERVIEW ENDS