

# The not-so-funny farm

**By Ian Bell**

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**W**hen the jury is still out, you can't have a verdict. You can have opinions, even faith, but until those who have studied the evidence reach a firm conclusion your views are not worth a great deal. Being a new Labour minister, even a prime minister, does not grant you supernatural powers of prophecy and insight denied to the rest of us. That's the nub of the argument where genetically modified crops are concerned. The government knows only too well that a large majority of people don't want their food modified. It knows, too, that if the public's questions were properly addressed and properly answered, opposition would probably melt away.

Show beyond doubt that the stuff is safe, in this age of mad cow disease and Sars, and we might just swallow it. Instead, according to papers leaked last week, the Blair administration intends to allow the first crop of GM maize in the name of British science regardless of what the public thinks. A government that claims to be in the middle of a "Big Conversation" with voters has decided to turn off its hearing aid. Typically, it presents this as a staunch refusal to "take the easy way out". Most of us know, however, that the hard way, unthinkable to the Blairites, would be to continue to resist the demands of the United States and its agri-business.

That lobby tends to present GM as the latest gee-whiz way to save the world. Plant the new seeds, they say, and hunger will be banished among the wretched of the Earth. It sounds like a splendid aspiration. But why, then, are the GM companies so fanatically keen on forcing their way into the European market? Starvation isn't exactly an issue on this side of the Atlantic. If anything, we are glutted with foods of every variety. Obesity is our problem, not hunger.

Last year, in any case, the government held what it called a national GM debate. (Were you consulted? Me neither). This produced a disappointing, not to say dismal, result for GM's proponents. More than 80% of those polled didn't want modified foodstuffs and only 2% said they would knowingly let such substances pass their lips. Other surveys have suggested that opposition is perhaps less deeply rooted, but none have established anything like a majority for tampering with food. Still the government, knowing nothing for sure, maintains that it knows better.

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In fact, the science it has commissioned is scarcely compelling. A five-year trial by the advisory committee on releases to the environment ended in January with a report concluding that GM maize is preferable to maize saturated with herbicides (right answer, wrong question), but establishing that both GM oil-seed rape and GM sugar beet were harmful to the environment. This confirmed previous findings, including those of the government's own chief scientist, Sir David King. Still the government presses on.

It does not know – because no-one knows – how to prevent GM crops from contaminating ordinary crops, particularly organic crops. It cannot say – because no-one can say – what economic benefit there is to be had from GM, though its own Cabinet Office has struggled to identify any benefit whatsoever. It cannot even begin to predict – because it chooses not to predict – whether the imposition of GM will provoke civil disobedience, or worse, from environmentalists and others. It is walking into a minefield, not a maize field, and appears not to grasp the fact.

The government's real motives are, as usual, not hard to fathom. You can just about summarise them in a sentence: what America wants, America must have. The US, with Canada and Argentina at its heels, has gone to the World Trade Organisation with a suit maintaining that the European Union's moratorium on GM – no permission to plant until its safety is proven – is illegal. The Americans choose to believe that listening to the concerns of the EU's citizens is just an excuse for protectionism. Thus the obedient Blairites, with no other shred of justification, are doing America's work. At the risk of sounding melodramatic, our government is taking the side of a foreign power against its own people.

Well, if Iraq demonstrated nothing else it showed that such is a tenet, these days, of what passes for British foreign policy. It also illustrates a wilful misunderstanding, in some quarters, of what the anti-globalisation campaign is about. We can argue about capitalism and free trade – put me down as a practising heretic – but when commercial interests are elevated above the will of a country's people the real debate is about democracy.

Those leaked papers allegedly state explicitly that the government has a clear understanding of the depth of opposition to GM. As a member of the EU's inner council, that government also knows that the wishes of an entire continent are at issue. It prefers, nevertheless, to let the GM genie out of a bottle to which it can never be returned.

That, I suspect, is what troubles ordinary people most. We are talking about a process that is irreversible. The biotech industry, we can be certain, will not lift a finger to prevent the contamination of organic crops: contamination is in its interests. Last week, indeed, Paul Rylott, head of biosciences at BayerCropScience, told *The Guardian* that his industry had no intention whatever of funding compensation for organic farmers, as the government apparently proposes.

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Compensation was unnecessary, said Rylott, and “silly” because simple precautions, such as keeping GM crops at a set distance from ordinary crops, was all the protection organics require. You can sense the way the wind is blowing, and it is carrying modified seeds.

I am not, I hope, guilty of Luddism, or whatever the environmental equivalent to machine-smashing might be. Genetic research has a vast potential for good; the possibilities flowing from the human genome project are endless.

But what sort of lunatic proposes altering a fundamental resource – and they don’t come much more fundamental than food – in an irreversible way without a cast-iron certainty that they know precisely what they are doing? In the matter of GM food we can all agree that opinion is divided, but that ought to be enough, of itself, to instil maximum caution. They will tell you that no-one should have a veto on scientific progress. That, it appears, is one of the government’s central arguments. It says that a ban on GM would be “irrational” given its science policy and its commitment to “the UK science base”. This sounds impressive until you remind yourself how the same government would react to any attempt at human cloning in Britain.

That government also imposes restrictions, though not enough of them, on experiments with animals. Science is tightly regulated in this country, yet, when American big business comes calling, restraint disappears.

Which, in the long run, is more important: supporting a nascent, home-grown (as it were) organics industry, or co-operating with foreign multi-nationals whose products might well put an end to organic food? Is it better for a government to listen to its people, or ease the way of the US in its battle with the EU, our treaty partners? In this affair the only jury that should count is being denied a vote, and not for the first time.

At bottom, all of this illustrates why the struggle to control globalisation matters. The international argument over GM has its roots in a free trade regime that allows a dominant economy, in this case America, to impose its will on others simply because the unimpeded flow of goods and services is held to be sacred. That same regime has forced privatisation, theft at public expense, on most of the planet and it has a nasty habit of promoting wars, trade wars and shooting wars.

Anyone who tells you, for example, that the US has absolutely no commercial interests in Iraq is a liar or a fool. Anyone who suggests, equally, that the government’s determination to introduce GM stems from a devotion to science should take the matter up with a university researcher working for a pittance. Globalisation is the issue.

Next, according to the leaked document, will come a propaganda campaign promising a land of GM milk and GM honey. The truth will be genetically modified from its present, simple state – we just don’t know enough – to something far grander and less honest by

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tame MPs and scientists employed by the biotech industry. One thing I guarantee: it won't be good for your digestion.

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