

Genetically Modified Politicians: Their Battle to Persuade the Public to Accept GM Food

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The official UK government policy on genetically modified (GM) crops is “precautionary, evidence-based and sensitive to public concerns”. Who are they kidding?

My heart always sinks when, listening to the BBC’s *Today* programme, someone from the Department for International Development starts talking about the “international food crisis”, and the starving people in all those poor undeveloped countries (the ones we helped to pauper with our empire building). I know for sure that in the next day or two, in the top political slot on *Today*, I’ll be listening to Environment Minister Owen Paterson telling us that we must embrace GM technology if we want to feed the world. It normally coincides with his giving a speech or two about the wonders of GM crops and food, full of outrageous and unscientific statements. Prime Minister David Cameron chips in with a comment to the media about how Britain is losing the scientific race to feed the world.

It happens with depressing regularity, and it never goes as smoothly as they hope. Although Monsanto has, for now, [withdrawn](#) from Europe, the lobbying of politicians is relentless. Last year the GM companies, having met with British ministers at a little-publicised ‘[Growing for Growth](#)’ conference, started another push to promote GM. They were immediately backed up by Owen Paterson insisting that GM food will sort our problems – no worries. He was followed in July by David Cameron saying Europe was “being [left behind](#)” even though the previous month it had been disclosed that GM food is [banned](#) from all the restaurants and cafes in the Palace of Westminster, and he himself was refusing to say whether he’d feed GM food to his family.

Chivvied by the biotech people, Paterson made a [further push](#) later last year but the campaign was spoilt in January by a report stating that almost 50% of the world’s food is [wasted](#). The hunger is a result of how we manage the world, not the earth’s inability to feed us.

Perhaps the biotech companies were encouraged by a survey [published](#) in March last year, showing that more people were now “unconcerned” about GM crops and food. The trouble with surveys like this is that you can point to the bit that supports your opinion and, if you are the Environment Secretary, Prime Minister or perhaps a biotech CEO, happily ignore the rest. So while both ministers and media trumpeted the news that more people (25%) were now unconcerned about GM food (up from 17% in 2003), they ignored the other 75%, especially the 46% that remain concerned about the technology and its risks.

However, according to [Farmers Weekly](#), those who took part were also asked which crops they would be happy to see grown – *in the UK*. Having obviously listened to Paterson’s

intemperate and inaccurate statements about Golden Rice, 64% said they would “theoretically” support rice with added vitamin A. It would seem the respondents have little knowledge of our climate (rice grows in hot climates and though some high-altitude strains exist, they need levels of sunshine we can’t provide); agriculture (some people have succeeded in growing rice in UK greenhouses, which hardly compares with fields of wheat, maize and canola/rape); biology (carrots, spinach, kale, cabbage, pumpkins, winter squash etc. are all high in beta-carotene/vitamin A. No need to add it to rice, just eat a balanced diet); and geography (the last time I looked, the UK was not part of the Philippines which is where Golden Rice is being [developed](#), and where 1.7 million Filipino children suffer from vitamin A deficiency).

But then Guy Adams [wrote](#) in June this year, “a recent survey by *Which?* found that 71 per cent of Britons believe GM food, and meat from animals fed on GM food, should be banned from supermarkets. A further 15 per cent are “undecided”. In other words, just over one in ten thinks it’s a good idea.”

And a YouGov poll this year found that only 21% of the public supported GM food. Further, despite the hard sell by Paterson and Cameron, 43% of people said they “were completely against” the government promoting GM technology. A [survey](#) of farmers published at the same time (funded by Barclays Bank in collaboration with Farmers Weekly), found that even farmers are reluctant to grow GM crops and only 15% of them would eat GM food. They’re at one with Westminster there then, with its reluctance to eat the stuff.

Having failed with the public and with those who grow our food, one could understand that GM companies feel the need to lobby UK politicians in order to further their desire to control our food supply. But in the United States, where much of the food is now so GM based that it is difficult to avoid eating it, you would think they had won the battle for American hearts and intestines. But Monsanto still generously supports Republicans and anyone else that can push their agenda forward, which argues that even there the battle over public opinion is not won.

Last April US citizens were outraged by the passing of what became [known](#) as the ‘Monsanto Protection Act’, a rider (H.R.933) quietly added to the Agriculture Appropriations bill, which says federal courts cannot intervene and halt biotech companies from planting and selling GMO goods to the public, even if testing proves them to be potentially hazardous to the greater public. Senator Barbara Mikulski [issued](#) a statement apologising for letting this be signed into law. She said that “she didn’t put the language in the bill and doesn’t support it either.” According to [Russia Today](#) , “Sen. Roy Blunt (R-Missouri) has been credited with crafting the language of H.R. 933 by working directly alongside Monsanto. Blunt has received \$64,250 from Monsanto towards his campaign committee between 2008 and 2012.” Well, there’s a surprise.

Last May, despite the fact that several states wanted it, the Senate [refused](#) to allow them to enact laws forcing manufacturers to label products with GM content. Senators of states that grow a lot of GM crops strongly opposed this move. Among their reasons were that “labels would raise costs for consumers”. A bit of honesty and extra ink on a label is going to cost more?

But the public fights on. In October the Senate killed off the Monsanto Protection Act. As in Britain, US citizens are suspicious of GM foods. According to the [Cornucopia Institute](#),

“polling conducted last year by the Mellman Group indicated that nearly 90% of Americans would like GMO foods labelled so they can make a choice about what kinds of foods they purchase in the marketplace.” Choice? GM foods? Where pro-GM politicians are concerned, they don’t belong in the same room, let alone in the same sentence.

And now we hear of the cosy government/biotech relationship in South Africa. This month the African Centre for Biosafety, having already shown that the entire maize meal market is saturated with GM, released a [report](#) showing how a select group of companies (with government backing) now controls the entire maize chain, to the detriment of the poorest people. In [Africa](#), only South Africa, Egypt, Sudan and Burkino Fasso currently grow commercial GM crops, and despite public opposition, the lobbying of governments by Monsanto and others will most likely mean many more African farmers being pressured into growing them.

You would think, if you listened to the constant bleating of our politicians, that Britain is “being left behind” by the rest of the world, because of our reluctance to join the GM revolution. Primed by the lobbyists, they give the impression that everywhere but here, people’s fields and fridges are full of GM crops and foods; that if anywhere suffers from food insecurity it will be us; that poor people in the developing countries will suffer from food insecurity unless we grow GM crops here (I’m still trying to understand the logic of that one). Has the rest of the world really signed up to GM foods – or are the politicians and biotech companies telling GM porkies?*

The reverse of course is the truth. Politicians who are less joined at the hip to big business are listening to the people, the farmers and consumers. More places are opting to be GM-free. Countries like Uruguay that have grown GM crops are [banning](#) the introduction of any new crops. The Mexican government recently banned the planting of all GM maize – but then Mexican farmers surely know more about real maize than Monsanto! Several South American countries, having grown GM crops for some time, are gradually changing the rules. In November 2011 Peru introduced a 10-year ban on all GM crops. Brazil has, for the time being at least, introduced a ban on planting GM seeds. Paraguay is planning a similar ban. Peru, Ecuador and Venezuela have all declared [national bans](#) on GM foods.

In Europe, despite heavy lobbying and pro-GM politicians trying to open up the market and our fields, people are still making their voices heard. Italy has a complete ban on all GM crops. France, Luxemburg, Germany, Austria, Greece, Romania and Poland have banned Monsanto’s maize. Switzerland has a moratorium on all genetically engineered crops and animals, due for renewal in December 2017. They did several studies on the risks and benefits of GM crops and although they felt that there may be little danger in growing them, also decided that, for Switzerland, there was little financial benefit to be had either.

This year [Hungary](#), which had banned GM crops, found that the forbidden crops were being grown illegally anyway. The government didn’t hang about – all the crops were destroyed. A new Hungarian law enacted back in March stipulates that before any new seeds are introduced into the market, they must first undergo checks to make sure they are free of GMOs. They are now considering making the planting of GM seeds a felony. And [Russia](#) is considering a total ban.

However, other EU countries have not managed a comprehensive ban, although various areas within countries have taken action. In the [United Kingdom](#) both Scotland and Wales are officially ‘GM-free’, though Owen Paterson will probably ignore such democracy. Various

local authorities, including 17 County Councils, have voted to remain GM-free, mostly in order to help protect organic growers. In [Ireland](#) there are 9 GM-free counties. The Republic of Ireland wanted to make the whole island GM-free, but sadly Northern Ireland wouldn't cooperate.

In North America, some US states like California are GM-free. Canada's civil society is constantly campaigning against GM. New Zealand has a ban as does South Australia and Tasmania. Japan banned the growing of GM crops but "Japanese food manufacturers are actively [importing](#) "Roundup Ready" GMO canola grown in Canada primarily to manufacture canola oil. As a result, scientists have found that the GMO canola variety is now growing wild along roadsides and ports that have been the supply line for canola importation."

What is noticeable about these bans is that in many places both people and their governments are not against research into genetic modification. No. They are against the wholesale marketing of the biotech corporations that have no regard for the earth. But why Poland, Hungary, Paraguay and the rest? One reason may be that in so many places, despite the globalisation of Western culture, people have managed to maintain their links to a rural peasant culture; a culture that lives according to the pace of nature; that lives closer to the land; whose farmers embody generations of earth-based wisdom and whose people have an interest in growing clean healthy food because it is what they themselves eat.

This is not to say that the bans we have achieved will not be reversed by GM-lobbied politicians. We must keep up the pressure. People who love their patch of earth and love the food they eat are turning out to be remarkably GM-resistant - unlike their genetically modified politicians who are now logic- and science-resistant and extremely lobbyist-tolerant.

**For international readers: 'porkies' is an example of Cockney rhyming slang. Pork pies = lies.*

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