

Let's do a Monsanto

The government says that it wants a 'great debate' about GM – we must call its bluff

Something about the launch of the government's "great GM debate" last week rang a bell. It was, perhaps, the contrast between the ambition of its stated aims and the feebleness of their execution. Though the environment secretary, Margaret Beckett, claims she wants "to ensure all voices are heard", she has set aside an advertising budget of precisely zero. Public discussions will take place in just six towns.

Then I got it. Five years ago, Monsanto, the world's most controversial biotechnology company, did the same thing. In June 1998, after its attempts to persuade consumers that they wanted to eat genetically modified food had failed, it launched what it called a public debate "to encourage a positive understanding of food biotechnology". As the company's GM investments were then valued at \$96bn (£60bn), the proposition that it might desist if the response was unfavourable seemed unlikely.

To Monsanto's horror, it got the debate it said it wanted. A few days after it launched its new policy, Prince Charles wrote an article for the Telegraph. His argument, as always, was cack-handed and contradictory, but it shoved genetic engineering to the top of the news agenda. Monsanto's share value slumped. Within two years it had been taken over by Pharmacia, a company it once dwarfed.

Like Monsanto, the British government has already invested in genetic engineering. In 1999, it allocated £13m (or 26 times what it is spending on the great debate) "to improve the profile of the biotech industry", by promoting "the financial and environmental benefits of biotechnology". This, and its appointment of major biotech

investors to head several research committees and a government department, ensured that it lost the confidence of the public. So, like Monsanto, it now seeks to revive that confidence, by claiming – rather too late – that it is open to persuasion. Again, the decision to introduce the crops to Britain appears to have been made long before the debate began.

Last year, an unnamed minister told the Financial Times that the debate was simply a “PR offensive”. “They’re calling it a consultation,” he said, “but don’t be in any doubt, the decision is already taken.” In March, Margaret Beckett began the licensing process for 18 applications to grow or import commercial quantities of GM crops in Britain. Her action pre-empts the debate, pre-empts the field trials designed to determine whether or not the crops are safe to grow here, and pre-empts the only real decisions which count: namely those made by the EU and the World Trade Organisation. The WTO must now respond to an official US complaint about Europe’s refusal to buy GM food. If the US wins, we must either pay hundreds of millions of dollars of annual compensation, or permit GM crops to be grown and marketed here.

Why should this prospect concern us? I might have hoped that, five years after the first, real debate began in Britain, it would not be necessary to answer that question. But so much misinformation has been published over the past few weeks that it seems I may have to start from the beginning.

The principal issue, perpetually and deliberately ignored by government, many scientists, most of the media and, needless to say, the questionnaire being used to test public opinion, is the corporate takeover of the food chain. By patenting transferred genes and the technology associated with them, then buying up the competing seed merchants and seed-breeding centres, the biotech companies can exert control over the crops at every stage of production and sale. Farmers are reduced to their sub-contracted agents. This has devastating implications for food security in the poor world: food is removed from local marketing networks – and therefore the mouths of local people – and gravitates instead towards sources of hard currency. This problem is compounded by the fact that (and this is another perpetually neglected issue) most of the acreage of GM crops is devoted to producing not food for humans, but feed for animals.

The second issue is environmental damage. Many of the crops have been engineered to withstand applications of weedkiller. This permits farmers to wipe out almost every competing species of plant in their fields. The exceptions are the weeds which, as a result of GM pollen contamination, have acquired multiple herbicide resistance. In Canada, for example, some oilseed rape is now resistant to all three of the most widely used modern pesticides. The result is that farmers trying to grow other crops must now

spray it with 2,4-D, a poison which persists in the environment.

The third issue, greatly over-emphasised by the press, is human health. There is, as yet, no evidence of adverse health effects caused directly by GM crops. This could be because there are no effects, or it could be because the necessary clinical trials and epidemiological studies have, extraordinarily, still to be conducted.

There is, however, some evidence of possible indirect effects. In 1997 the Conservative government quietly raised the permitted levels of glyphosate in soya beans destined for human consumption by 20,000%. Glyphosate is the active ingredient of Roundup, the pesticide which Monsanto's soya beans have been engineered to resist. "Roundup Ready" GM crops, because they are sprayed directly with the herbicide, are likely to contain far higher levels of glyphosate than conventional ones. In 1999, the Journal of the American Cancer Society reported that exposure to glyphosate led to increased risks of contracting a type of cancer called non-Hodgkin's lymphoma.

The defenders of GM crops say we can avoid all such hazards by choosing not to eat them. The problem is that we can avoid them only if we know whether or not the food we eat contains them. The US appears determined to attack the strict labelling requirements for which the European parliament has now voted. If it succeeds in persuading the WTO that accurate labelling is an unfair restriction, then the only means we have of avoiding GM is to eat organic, whose certification boards ensure that it is GM-free. But as pollen from GM crops contaminates organic crops, the distinction will eventually become impossible to sustain. While banning GM products might at first appear to be a restriction of consumer choice (someone, somewhere, might want to eat one), not banning them turns out to be a far greater intrusion upon our liberties.

The only chance we have of keeping them out of Europe is to ensure that the political cost becomes greater than the economic cost: to demand, in other words, that our governments fight the US through the WTO and, if they lose, pay compensation rather than permit them to be planted. So let us join this debate, and see how much the government likes it when "all voices are heard". Like Monsanto, it may come to wish it had never asked. #

George Monbiot's book, The Age of Consent: A Manifesto for a New World Order will be published on June 16.