

Starved of the truth

Biotech firms are out to corner the market,
so they have to persuade us something else is at stake

The question is as simple as this: do you want a few corporations to monopolise the global food supply? If the answer is yes, you should welcome the announcement that the government is expected to make today that the commercial planting of a genetically modified (GM) crop in Britain can go ahead. If the answer is no, you should regret it. The principal promotional effort of the genetic engineering industry is to distract us from this question.

GM technology permits companies to ensure that everything we eat is owned by them. They can patent the seeds and the processes that give rise to them. They can make sure that crops can't be grown without their patented chemicals. They can prevent seeds from reproducing themselves. By buying up competing seed companies and closing them down, they can capture the food market, the biggest and most diverse market of all.

No one in her right mind would welcome this, so the corporations must persuade us to focus on something else. At first they talked of enhancing consumer choice, but when the carrot failed, they switched to the stick. Now we are told that unless we support the deployment of GM crops in Britain, our science base will collapse. And that, by refusing to eat GM products in Europe, we are threatening the developing world with starvation. Both arguments are, shall we say, imaginative; but in public relations, cogency counts for little. All that matters is that you spin the discussion out for long enough to achieve the necessary result. And that means recruiting eminent

figures to make the case on your behalf.

Last October, 114 scientists, many of whom receive funding from the biotech industry, sent an open letter to the prime minister claiming that Britain's lack of enthusiasm for GM crops "will inhibit our ability to contribute to scientific knowledge internationally". Scientists specialising in this field, they claimed, were being forced to leave the country to find work elsewhere.

Now forgive me if you've heard this before, but it seems to need repeating. GM crops are not science. They are technological products of science. To claim, as Tony Blair and several senior scientists have done, that those who oppose GM are "anti-science" is like claiming that those who oppose chemical weapons are anti-chemistry. Scientists are under no greater obligation to defend GM food than they are to defend the manufacture of Barbie dolls.

This is not to say that the signatories were wrong to claim that some researchers who have specialised in the development of engineered crops are now leaving Britain to find work elsewhere. As the public has rejected their products, the biotech companies have begun withdrawing from this country, and they are taking their funding with them. But if scientists attach their livelihoods to the market, they can expect their livelihoods to be affected by market forces. The people who wrote to Blair seem to want it both ways: commercial funding, insulated from commercial decisions.

In truth, the biotech companies' contribution to research in Britain has been small. Far more money has come from the government. Its Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council, for example, funds 26 projects on GM crops and just one on organic farming. If scientists want a source of funding that's unlikely to be jeopardised by public concern, they should lobby for this ratio to be reversed.

But the plight of the men in white coats isn't much of a tearjerker. A far more effective form of emotional blackmail is the one deployed in the Guardian last week by Lord Taverne, the founder of the Prima PR consultancy. "The strongest argument in favour of developing GM crops," he wrote, "is the contribution they can make to reducing world poverty, hunger and disease."

There's little doubt that some GM crops produce higher yields than some conventional crops, or that they can be modified to contain more nutrients, though both these developments have been overhyped. Two projects have been cited everywhere: a sweet potato being engineered in Kenya to resist viruses, and vitamin A-enhanced rice. The first scheme has just collapsed. Despite \$6m of funding from Monsanto, the World Bank and the US government, and endless hype in the press, it turns out to have produced no improvement in virus resistance, and a decrease in yield. Just over the border in Uganda, a far cheaper conventional breeding programme

has almost doubled sweet potato yields. The other project, never more than a concept, now turns out not to work even in theory – malnourished people appear not to be able to absorb vitamin A in this form. However, none of this stops Lord Taverne, or George Bush, or the Nuffield Council on Bioethics, from citing them as miracle cures for global hunger.

But some trials of this kind are succeeding, improving both yield and nutritional content. Despite the best efforts of the industry's boosters to confuse the two ideas, however, this does not equate to feeding the world.

The world has a surplus of food, but still people go hungry. They go hungry because they cannot afford to buy it. They cannot afford to buy it because the sources of wealth and the means of production have been captured and in some cases monopolised by landowners and corporations. The purpose of the biotech industry is to capture and monopolise the sources of wealth and the means of production.

Now in some places governments or unselfish private researchers are producing GM crops that are free from patents and not dependent on the application of proprietary pesticides, and these could well be of benefit to small farmers in the developing world. But Taverne and the other propagandists are seeking to persuade us to approve a corporate model of GM development in the rich world, in the hope that this will somehow encourage the opposite model to develop in the poor world.

Indeed, it is hard to see what on earth the production of crops for local people in poor nations has to do with consumer preferences in Britain. Like the scientists who wrote to the prime minister, the emotional blackmailers want to have it both ways: these crops are being grown to feed starving people, but the starving people won't be able to eat them unless or ... they can export this food to Britain.

And here we encounter the perpetually neglected truth about GM crops. The great majority are not being grown to feed local people. In fact, they are not being grown to feed people at all, but to feed livestock, whose meat, milk and eggs are then sold to the world's richer consumers. The GM maize the government is expected to approve today is no exception. If in the next 30 years there is a global food crisis, it will be because the arable land that should be producing food for humans is instead producing feed for animals.

The biotech companies are not interested in whether science is flourishing or whether people are starving. They simply want to make money. The best way to make money is to control the market. But before you can control the market, you must first convince the people that there's something else at stake. #