



Power, dissent, equality: understanding contemporary politics

GM: The UK debate

Voice Over

In the early 1990's American farmers began planting new types of crops whose seeds had been genetically modified using the latest bio-technological processes. By the end of the decade some of these so-called GM foods were appearing on the shelves of British supermarkets; controversy ensued. Following recent food scares over Mad Cow Disease and Salmonella, GM foods were the subject of fierce debate - were they safe to eat - what impact would they have on the environment - were they really needed? Sales of GM foods plummeted. The British Government decided to take a softy-softly approach to GM; they called for a voluntary moratorium on commercial use, but approved large scale experimental plantings of GM crops - the farm scale of evaluations. In 2002 a new media storm blew up over these trials.

Karly Graham, housewife and GM Activist

My friend noticed in the newspaper that one of the four GM crop trials in the whole country was growing just down the road from us and none of us knew about it, there was nothing, there was no sort of local notification, or we hadn't seen it, so we started doing some homework, and the more we found out about it, the less comfortable we were, and so we arranged a public meeting.

Michael Meacher, MP, Minister of state for the Environment & Agro-development 1997-2003

Well this is an extraordinary contentious issue, there's no doubt about that. There are people who are passionate about it at both ends who've made up their minds, and frankly are not listening very much to the arguments. There are the scientists who work for the bio-technology industry - they are very keen on it - and there are people at the other end who think that GM is next to the devil, that if you eat GM food it'll cause death and destruction and the Plague, of which there is frankly no evidence.

Voice Over

In the face of growing opposition to the farm scale evaluations the Government decided to stage a thorough investigation into the whole GM issue.

Karly Graham, housewife and GM Activist

I think they panicked when they realised that everything was going against them as on the GM issue, that they hadn't consulted them, that's one of the things that people are most upset about, and that people felt that their rights were being ridden roughshod over, they didn't have a say in what was going on.

Prof. Robin Grove-White, Member AEBC, GM Public Debate Steering Board

I don't think they fully realised what they were letting themselves in for and in fact very quickly we got feedback, you know informal feedback, that in the Cabinet committee responsible they were appalled by this idea that it was now going to be opened up to public discussion.

Voice Over

First of all the Government commissioned a study into the economic impact of GM food.

Michael Meacher

This was undertaken by civil servants in Number Ten - it was not a pro-GM report. It said what everyone knew, that the economics of this, well there weren't any economics because people didn't want it - if they weren't going to buy it there was no market so it concluded that

there would be no economic benefit to Britain in the foreseeable future in going down this route. Now that's not what the Prime Minister or Margaret Beckett or officials wanted to hear.

Voice Over

The two most widely publicised Government initiatives were the Science Review Panel and GM Nation, a large-scale public consultation exercise.