



Politics

GM Crops

We chose to look at GM crops in this course because at the beginning of this Millennium it was a very, very important topic of scientific importance and of economic importance, and also in respect of public concern about it as well. The issue was around whether GM crops should be commercially grown or not, that was the big debate that was going on at the time and it looked as though the Government had a particular point of view about that which was to say that yes, it should, this was an important technology which could bring economic benefit to companies, to the country, and so on; on the other hand, the Government was aware that there were public concerns around it, so they decided to set up this very interesting way of deciding whether they were going to commercially grow GM crops or not which had these three elements to it – the scientific panel, the economic panel, and also the question around the actual public debate. And the Science Review panel was there to review the scientific evidence in terms of genetically modified crops, whether they were indeed a danger to health, whether they were problematic as far as environmental integrity is concerned, and it was one of the very, very important legs of the whole inquiry. The idea here was to try to focus on what Tony Blair, the then Prime Minister, used to refer to as sound science, and for the people involved on that panel sound science meant peer reviewed science so trying to marginalise, anecdote personal opinions and just look at the peer reviewed science and see what it said, but there is a suggestion that the Scientific Review panel ignored the environment side of the question because part of the scientific inquiries intended to see the degree to which genetically modified crops might affect the environment around them, as it were, so the degree to which wildlife, for example, might be affected by genetic modification, together indeed with the herbicides of course which go along with this kind of technology. There is another way of thinking about it as well though, which is environmental values really, the degree to which the value of the environment as a relatively pristine, untouched, natural process is affected by genetic modification. Now that kind of more philosophical, if you like, more ethical point of view perhaps, wasn't taken into account in the science panel anyway to the degree that people might have wanted, but on the other hand it certainly did find its way into the public debate element of it, so in the round it was taken into account I would say.

The novel thing was bringing the public into this thing too, and that was what especially interesting from the point of view of the course because then we were able to deal with these questions of participation, protest, issues around evidence and argument as well, which is very important - what counts as evidence, what kinds of arguments can you have, how do you best conduct them, and so on? And in a way the findings of the Economic Panel were bound up with quite closely with what happened in the public debate too, because the public debate revealed that people were very concerned overall about the commercialisation of GM crops, people were extremely suspicious about the motivations for it on the one hand, and as it were the potential fact of it on the other. Now that immediately impacts upon the economic assessment because if people are concerned they're not going to buy the products; if they're not going to buy the products there's no market for them, and so the money that would be spent on R&D – on Research and Development - by the GM crop companies is not going to be spent because they're going to think well, we're not going to make anything out of this. So the economic findings in a way were really very, very closely bound up with the findings that emerged from the public debate as well, and I think both of them in the round, again, came to the conclusion that this wasn't the right thing to do, it this wasn't inappropriate, to license the commercialisation of GM crops in Britain – at least the three crops that were examined. And in February 2004 after this consultation process had taken place, and after the various panels had reported, the Government produced its policy on the commercialisation of GM crops. The conclusion was that there wasn't a case for going ahead with the commercialisation of two of the three crops anyway.

The exception was GM maize which they felt could legitimately be commercialised. But because the economic case had collapsed by this point, the company which had shown greatest interest in the commercial growing of GM crops in Britain pulled out, so the effect of all of this was that in the end there was, and there has not been since, any commercial growing of any GM crop in this country – as far as I know, anyway – and that's the situation we're still in. On the other hand, the pressures are always there. There is no doubt money to be made out of this technology, and companies that are involved in this are interested in trying to break into new markets, and the European Union, including the UK of course, is potentially a very, very big market, so the pressures are continually there.