



## **Power, dissent, equality: understanding contemporary politics**

*GM: Science review panel*

### **Voice Over**

In November 2002 the Government set up the Science Review Panel to, in their own words, examine the extent of current scientific knowledge behind GM, with particular focus on crops.

### **Prof Howard Dalton, DEFRA Chief Scientific adviser, Joint Chair Science Review Panel**

Essentially it was to try and engage with as many people who were specialists in the area, particularly the specialist scientists and they came from academia; they came from industry; we asked the NGO's also to put forward their candidates; we had quite a wide mix of individuals, mostly experts, but also non-experts and non-specialists as well, to add a broader flavour to try to understand what the science is all about.

### **Prof Simon Bright, Ex-Syngenta, Science Review Panel**

I thought the Chairman, David King, had an immense skill to bring all the people along and so in that sense I think the chairmanship was absolutely crucial to make progress. There were some points where he could have one person saying this is black, somebody else saying this white, and he would say I, you know, I can detect some, you know, areas of convergence here, so I mean he was extremely skilful at moving the panel along.

### **Prof Howard Dalton**

The agenda was very much to look at what science was out there. We were quite detached and dispassionate I think about what was there; we, there was a lot of anecdotal evidence and we tended to ignore anecdotal evidence, we were trying put together what was what we called, and what the Prime Minister asked for, and that was sound science, and in our view sound science meant peer review society, it didn't involve anecdotal evidence, it didn't involve reports in newspapers, it didn't involve individuals expressing their opinions about things, it involved looking deeply at what the science was, what the published literature was telling us, so we that we could understand better.

### **Voice Over**

The Government's agenda, however, was not uncontroversial; some feared that it might have too narrow a focus and ignore the wider environmental questions.

### **Dr. Mark Avery, Head of Conservation, RSPB, Member Science Review Panel**

Maybe for a while they saw the environmental arguments as being a bit outside science, but I'm a scientist by training and I think several of us on the committee were able to point out that there were real issues about how the countryside should be managed, whether GM crops would be good or bad for wildlife, and those were important issues of public policy that science could contribute to, so I think we probably won some people over through being good scientists, through having scientific arguments.

### **Voice Over**

Others questioned whether there was really enough research available to make a genuinely scientific appraisal of GM.

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

The science is very immature in this area, very emergent, and there was very little scientific interest in it in the mainstream science - there were a lot of scientists outside who were saying these were saying these were significant issues, and there were, so that that the science, the science base that was being used was very, as it were, provisional in its scope.

**Dr. Andrew Stirling, GM Science Review Panel Member**

The answer you get from science depends on the questions you ask, so this idea that we can make science-based policy is really quite problematic, and it is open to people working very hard behind the scenes to condition the type of recommendations that the science makes.

**Voice Over**

The true sceptics doubted that the Government would really listen to the arguments, claiming that Tony Blair in particular had already made up mind.

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

A lot of people asked me why is Tony Blair so much in favour of GM? I think - I never had this discussion with him so I cannot be certain - but my view is that he is in favour of this because he sees it as innovative, he sees it as a new technology, he sees it as good for business, and he sees it as fitting in with his pro-American stance.

**Voice Over**

As the meetings continued there were allegations that anti-GM voices were actively being discriminated against.

**Dr. Andrew Stirling,**

It came to my attention that moves had been made by a senior figure in the British regulatory establishment on GM to have me removed from an advisory body that I was sitting on for a very, for a major funding organisation, and the grounds for this were that I was taking a critical position on GM in the Science Review Panel, so I felt that this was unacceptable and highly problematic from not only my own point of view really, but from the point of view of how the science advice system should operate. So I went to Sir David King, who's the Chair of the Science Review Panel, and explained the situation to him, told him about the situation, and we discussed it and to his credit, I think, he decided that it did indeed warrant putting on the public record in the Minutes of the Science Review Panel, which is what he did.

**Voice Over**

In spite of all the controversies, overall the Science Review Panel was judged to be a success.

**Dr. Mark Avery**

I was very happy about the outcome, the reports of the GM Science Review Panel I felt I could support and I thought they were fair. I mean I think the Chairman, Sir David King, played a very good role in making the Committee work and making sure that all sides were listened to and that there was fairness, and that's an important part of the process as well. But it, I mean it was hard work, there were lots of meetings and they went on a long time, and yeah we, we argued.

**Voice Over**

They were particularly innovative in the way that they tried to address public concerns.

**Dr. Andrew Stirling,**

What was good was that the Science Review was coupled with public debate, and there was the idea of linking the two, and in principle that was a very novel and radical idea, so we can say that there was probably a greater attention to public values and priorities and concerns in the framing of the Science Review than virtually any other science review I can think of.