



Power, dissent, equality: understanding contemporary politics

GM: the GM Nation review

Voice Over

Whilst the review panel was looking at the scientific evidence, the Government initiated a more general public debate on an unprecedented scale: GM Nation.

Prof. Malcolm Grant, Chairman: GM Public Debate Steering Board, AEBC

We believed that we should try to construct something that was quite different from conventional consultation which does actually tend to be a sort of instruction and half-listen exercise into one in which the Government would be fully committed to an open process of discussion and dialogue, and also committed to listening and to taking it into account what they heard when they came to make decision. So that really was quite innovative and we had no knowledge of anything that had been attempted in the UK before or even internationally quite along those lines.

Clare Devereux, Ex-Director Five Year Freeze, Member AEBC: GM Public Debate Steering Board

There had been public debate, public debates going on all the time about these issues and it was particularly going on about the GM issue out there in society, but we wanted something that was, you know, structured, serious, really gave an opportunity to look at the issues, to discuss the pro's and cons, and that Government would pay attention to above all else.

Prof. Malcolm Grant

We tried to do it where people sat around tables and had their own discussion and debate, and eavesdropping on a number of those discussions illustrated to me just how far short normal debate falls of an actual interchange of views, and that forum around a table absolutely forced people to confront each other's views, and actually to confront their own opinions when they were challenged for what was the evidence and what was the justification for what they were arguing.

Voice Over

However, there were those who questioned the Government's real level of commitment.

Karly Graham, housewife and GM Activist

It was laughable, I thought it was laughable and everybody else that I knew thought it was, but I mean it was interesting if you think this is the way things are put together it was scary, I found it because it was so amateur. As I was saying they had a cartoonist there who was not there to depict the activities, he was there to capture the essence of our debates which was, which he didn't manage to do I'm afraid.

Prof. Malcolm Grant

I think we ran the debate on empty the whole time. There was not a sufficient budget to do the job properly. Indeed right at the beginning we had two major arguments with the Government: one was that they had completely under-costed the exercise that we were proposing to undertake; and the second was that the time that they had suggested to us was completely inappropriate for the necessary planning and execution and reporting. We succeeded to some extent on both of those arguments, we had a doubling of the budget, and we had a significant extension of the time. Neither of those concessions was won easily.

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

It was parsimonious, it was cheese-paring, it was done to a limited degree and I think the reason for that is because, quite honestly, the Government didn't actually want too many people getting into this debate.

Voice Over

After six weeks of public meetings all over the UK the Steering Committee retired to write their report on the British public's attitudes; the ball was now firmly in the Government's court.

Prof. Malcolm Grant

We emphasised very strongly from the beginning it was not a Referendum, and we also pressed Margaret Beckett to make a clear statement of what use the Government would make of the outcome of the debate. And that was vital because as I went round the countryside trying to encourage people to participate I had to answer that question – is this a put-up job by the Government purely as a smokescreen, or will they somehow commit themselves to engage with the outcome, so for the first time that I know of the Government said they would, they would take on board the outcome of the debate, and they would respond to it publicly which they eventually did when they made their policy announcement earlier this year.