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## **A brief history of Genetic Manipulation debate in Australia**

### **Civil Society for GM-free:**

Gene Ethics is a not-for-profit civil society GM-free advocacy group formed in 1988. From 1990 to 1996 the Australian federal government funded Gene Ethics and the industry-associated Gene Technology Information Unit (GTIU) to promote public discussion and debate on Genetic Manipulation techniques, research and their products. Gene Ethics included all points of view – science, government, industry and civil society in conferences and seminars that we organised in every Australian state. GTIU produced promotional materials. After 1996 we received no further official funding as most governments had adopted policies to promote GM crops and foods and have actively co-operated with science and industry interests ever since. We are supported solely by civil society donations of money and unpaid volunteer work.

Despite a lack of resources and official support, civil society groups have taken every opportunity to participate in government, industry and science-generated meetings and have always critiqued these promotional activities. Some groups now backing our various campaign and advocacy activities for GM-free futures include the GM-free Australia Alliance: <http://www.gmfreeaustralia.org.au/> Gene Ethics: <http://tinyurl.com/czgdz6c> Madge: <http://www.madge.org.au/> FoodWatch: <http://foodwatch.net.au/> SAGFIN: <http://sagfin.blogspot.com.au/> Safe Food Foundation: <http://safefoodfoundation.org/> Greenpeace: <http://www.greenpeace.org/australia/en/photosandvideos/videos/Seeds-of-Freedom/> Australian Conservation Foundation: <http://www.acfonline.org.au/> The Greens: <http://greens.org.au/node/3460> and many others. Our experience at gene ethics with Facebook shows that it can be a useful tool for alerting the community to key issues and perspectives on GM-free issues but the recent change of algorithms that restricts its reach makes it less effective now than it has been in the past: <http://tinyurl.com/czgdz6c> We are looking for other modes of social media to help us out here.

In parallel with government, industry and scientific community outreach to promote GM products (see below), a network of civil society organisations have organised many public rallies, speaking tours, meetings, parliamentary briefings and Bills, roundtables, and other events with local and visiting experts and activists over the past 25 years. Percy Schmeiser, Jeffrey Smith, Professor Seralini, Professor Heinemann, Dr Vandana Shiva, and Dr Shiv Chopra are among the best known of our visitors who contributed greatly to keeping the public discussion and debate alive and robust.

We have created and maintained a vibrant discussion and debate in print, electronic and online media throughout that time, with regular news and clipping services, writing letters to companies, government and newspaper editors, and making submissions on applications for the approval of GM crops and foods. We have had consistent successes despite the adverse influence of vested interests that seek to control or shut down public discussion and debate. For instance, two meetings we organized on the campuses of the South Australian and Adelaide Universities, during the state election campaign in February 2014, were cancelled without notice or explanation. Researchers and their corporate partners appear to have used their influence to disrupt the presentation of views that did not serve their interests. The hundreds of people who booked for these events were unhappy with the decision.

Over the years of campaigning and advocacy for GM-free futures, we have commissioned surveys through polling organisations, tested canola plants found in the environment to identify GM contamination where it is not permitted, and participated on advisory committees such as the Gene Technology Community Consultation Committee (GTCCC) and the Gene Technology Ethics Committee (GTEC) - now The Gene Technology Ethics and Community Consultative Committee (GTECCC):

<http://www.ogtr.gov.au/internet/ogtr/publishing.nsf/content/gteccc-2> that advises the Office of Gene Technology Regulator. Gene Ethics Executive Director Bob Phelps is also the public member of a university Institutional Biosafety Committee, the in-house advisory groups which each institution must establish to administer its GM activities. GM licences are only granted to institutions with an IBC to supervise compliance with licence conditions.

### **Short Unofficial History of GM debate in Australia:**

The first survey of public opinion in Australia was a single question in the International Social Science Survey in 1994. 89% of Australians then said they wanted all GM foods labeled and in the many surveys conducted since, over 90% of our community have always backed the full labelling of all foods made using GM techniques. Swinburne University's more recent surveys of public attitudes to a range of technologies confirm Australian's discomfort with GM products, especially from GM animals:

<http://www.swinburne.edu.au/lss/spru/monitor/Monitor2012.pdf>

In 1991, a House of Representatives Inquiry invited submissions and held several public hearings at which invitees gave oral evidence on the future of GM technologies in Australia. The Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Technology published its final report, Genetic Manipulation: the threat or the glory? on 23 March 1992:

[http://www.aph.gov.au/parliamentary\\_business/committees/house\\_of\\_representatives\\_committees?url=reports/1992/1992\\_pp52report.htm](http://www.aph.gov.au/parliamentary_business/committees/house_of_representatives_committees?url=reports/1992/1992_pp52report.htm)

The government then held consultations with state governments and other interested parties for a national regulatory system on GM but agreement was not reached with the West Australian government, and the plans were shelved.

In 1998, the Australian Consumers Association and The Australian Museum organized the First Australian Consensus Conference: Gene Technology In The Food Chain, with money from philanthropists and the chemical industry. It was held in the Old Parliament House in Canberra, March 10 - March 12 1999. A lay citizen's panel of 14 people from a pool of around 200 was recruited from around Australia and had prior meetings with technical experts.

During the consensus conference, witnesses with a diversity of expertise in the technical, social, environmental, ethical, economic and regulatory aspects of the technology and its products briefed the panel and answered their questions. The panel's report, with which they had editorial assistance, is here: <http://www.abc.net.au/science/slab/consconf/report.htm> The Minister sent a copy to the parliamentary library but the government did not officially accept it as they disagreed with its findings and recommendations. Civil society groups were reasonably satisfied with the report but criticized industry attempts to influence the process and the content of the report through their funding of the event and selection of participants. Their efforts were unsuccessful in the face of all the diverse evidence presented to the panel. A useful commentary is here: <http://books.google.com.au/books?id=ZWkFIRF-fG0C&pg=PA199&dq=Alison+Mohr+gm+consensus+conference+australia&hl=en&sa=X&ei=d11U8iFEszEkQWd84DYAQ&ved=0CC8Q6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=Alison%20Mohr%20gm%20consensus%20conference%20australia&f=false>

Balanced, objective and effective members of panels, presenters at meetings, policy discussants and decision-makers are those chosen from among a diverse group of people from all strata in society. They should have a broad range of well-informed world views, ethics and core values so that they can collectively arrive at robust outcomes that reflect and respect the diversity of views in their communities. Unfortunately, the free spirits in the universities, research institutions, government and GM industry who can let go of their vested interested and closed perspectives may be hard to find. Most are usually operating within the dominant paradigm and find it difficult to emerge from their preconceptions and commitments.

Later in 1999 the federal government's Health Department initiated a process to consult the community as a whole on the parameters of a national uniform regulatory system to monitor, regulate, license and enforce laws on gene technology. Public submissions were called for and government officials convened very well attended meetings and consultations nationwide. From this, a Bill was further debated in public and the federal parliament and later became the Gene Technology Act 2000 <http://www.comlaw.gov.au/Series/C2004A00762> The law established the Office of Gene Technology Regulator, responsible for all aspects of the law on gene technology research, development and commercialization, in conjunction with state and territory governments and other federal regulators – Health, Environment, Agriculture, Chemicals and Industry: <http://www.ogtr.gov.au/> The state governments later enacted mirror legislation to provide uniformity to the national system.

However, under the Act, state governments retain the power to declare GM and GM-free Zones on marketing grounds. Tasmania, South Australia and the Australian Capital Territory have exercised their rights to remain GM-free since 2003 when the OGTR issued commercial GM canola licences. GM cotton has been grown on a small scale in Queensland and New South Wales since 1996, while GM canola was commercialized in NSW and Victoria in 2008 and in Western Australia in 2010. The premium for GM-free canola is now up to \$70/tonne.

The processes of consultation for the lifting of the state bans on GM canola were very unsatisfactory. The governments set up 'expert' panels to report that all would be well and to expedite GM canola's release. The panels did not convene public meetings and were stacked with people with pro-GM science and industry connections.

In 2001, the federal government also helped fund the establishment of GM industry promotional group Ausbiotech: <http://www.ausbiotech.org/> and Agrifood Awareness, which

last year became the Agricultural Biotechnology Council of Australia: <http://www.abca.com.au/>

The federal government also created Biotechnology Australia in 2002 within the Department of Industry, to survey and positively influence public opinion on GM in food and farming. All parties were consulted about the design of the questionnaires but we remained critical of them because they push-poll respondents by giving them unreal and hypothetical scenarios to influence their later responses.

In our opinion, the strategy failed to convince anyone of its veracity or the reliability of its results. The National Enabling Technologies Strategy (NETS) replaced Biotech Australia from 2008-2012. NETS held many roundtables, lay people consensus meetings and public forums to explore the convergence of GM, nanotechnology, synthetic biology and other vanguard scientific fields that may produce commercial products. These were taxpayer-funded but public interest advocates often had to contribute to their own expenses to participate. <http://www.innovation.gov.au/Industry/Nanotechnology/NATIONALENABLINGTECHNOLOGIESSTRATEGY/Pages/default.aspx>

Other joint government and industry-backed and funded initiatives to achieve public acceptance of GM and its products include Tech 'N You, based at Melbourne University, which distributes material to schools and other institutions: <http://technyou.education.csiro.au/> It is supported by the publicly-funded CSIRO (Commonwealth Scientific and industrial Research Organisation) which also has an education unit that distributes materials and holds workshops for school students to encourage their interest in and uncritical acceptance of new technologies and their products: <http://www.csiro.au/Portals/Education.aspx>

Australia is not party to the Cartagena Protocol so does not promote debate or discussion on the safe international transfer, handling and use of LMOs. Civil society advocates mention the protocol and we monitor GM contamination events on the web and in print. e.g. <http://www.gmcropwatch.org.au/> Civil society groups are still lobbying to have Australia become a party and to comply with the Protocol. We reject our government's claim that the Protocol has the potential to create non-tariff barriers to trade.

### **Conclusion:**

All the processes and mechanisms of interest to BCH have been used in Australia, by all sides in the GM debate. If other countries want balanced debate and good outcomes, public resources should be provided at arms length and without strictures on their use, to all sides in the GM discussion. The more diverse the voices effectively raised and heard, the better will be the outcomes for public policy and decision-making.

**Bob Phelps 16/5/14**