

Genetically Modified Crops in Western Australia — Adjournment Debate

HON SALLY TALBOT (South West) [9.02 pm]: I would like to make a few comments in relation to the urgency motion that was moved in this house earlier today by Hon Paul Llewellyn on the question of genetically modified food. I had intended to speak in support of the motion, and I congratulate Hon Paul Llewellyn for raising this matter. In any field other than politics, it would be noted that when Hon Paul Llewellyn leaves this place in a couple of months, we will have three people to take his place. I just make that observation in passing. I also want to thank my colleagues on this side of the house who spoke in support of the motion—Hon Jon Ford and Hon Kim Chance—and who did a very good job in helping us understand the complexities of this very difficult issue. It is recognised by members on both sides of the house that there is nothing straightforward about opening up this state to this kind of technology.

I want to start by observing that the Liberal Party is really a very confusing beast. When we have had debates in this house on social issues, Liberal Party members have been the first to say that we need to exercise caution and be very circumspect about committing our society to going down a certain path. Hon Brian Ellis also contributed to the urgency motion this afternoon. Hon Brian Ellis recently made a speech in this house about a particular social issue. I guess he would be proud of the fact that his speech on that issue could be described as one of the most conservative speeches ever heard in this house. However, when Liberal members get to their feet on the question of genetically modified crops, all they can say is, “Well, it will be okay. The science looks all right. Just trust us on this.” That is a very confusing posture to adopt on this question. I simply cannot understand how a government which seems to pride itself on its conservative credentials can take little bits of science which seem to suggest that there may be some potential in this technology and thereby open the entire state to risks that have never been discounted by the science. What I am saying is not controversial. It is well documented throughout the literature that we simply do not know the effects of genetically modified crops on agriculture, on some of our social structures, and particularly on our health. I can only think that it is the nature of the risk itself that is posing a problem for members opposite in their apparently blind support of these trials.

I am not a scientist, but I understand some of the problems of trying to interpret scientific advice. It seems to me that there are two big risks to which the scientists admit they do not have an answer. The first is contamination. The fact is that when we instigate trials, we simply cannot guarantee that non-GM crops will not be contaminated by genetically modified organisms. We simply cannot guarantee it. Written into this trial are statements such as, “Let us just trial trucking it around the place and see what happens.” I can only think that honourable members opposite think there must be some kind of magic time switch that they will be able to push if they discover that they cannot confine this material to certain areas of the state. It seems to me to be completely nonsensical, and completely contradictory to any commonsense understanding of the issue, to think that once a non-GM crop is contaminated, we can go back. That is an enormous risk. That is spelt out as something that will be tested by the trial. If the answer is no, we cannot go back; therefore, what will people do? Are they going to say, “Oops! There we go. The trial did not work. Let’s go back”? We simply will not be able to do that.

The second issue is the health risks. When it comes to public health, even if we want to discount the precautionary principle in other areas, surely this is one area in which we simply cannot discount the fact that we need to be cautious. When are we going to learn that even though something may have all the indicators of being safe, unless we have conclusive evidence that it is safe, we should adopt the precautionary principle? The science here is not ambiguous. The Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation actually cancelled one of its trials. It actually called a halt to it before it was finished, because it was starkly evident from the results that it would be detrimental to health. Fortunately the CSIRO did not get as far as testing that GM crop on humans. I am referring, as some members will know, to the CSIRO research involving genetically modified peas. Peas were genetically modified to contain a rare gene that will inhibit a certain enzyme and make them resistant to beetle infestation of larvae that are unable to digest pea starch. However, when those GM peas were fed to mice, the mice developed lung inflammation, and consequentially that 10-year experiment was abandoned for reasons of safety. That does not seem to me to be ambiguous. I cannot see how members opposite, who are so fiercely protective of their conservative principles, can say on an issue like this, “Well, let’s just give it a go and see what happens.” If only they would adopt that attitude to some of the pressing social issues, it would increase equity and fairness throughout our community, but they do not do that. Somehow, when they are presented with all this stuff about science and agriculture, they say “Let’s give it a burl.” I cannot help but conclude that the government is considering only the commercial implications of this move, although, as we heard this afternoon in some of the contributions to the debate, even the commercial considerations are open to a broad range of questions.

All I can say is that members opposite are certainly not taking into account the health concerns, to which I have just referred; they are not taking into account the environmental concerns, to which I have also referred; and they

are most definitely not listening to public opinion. We heard Hon Robyn McSweeney, in leading the debate on the motion from the government side, saying that it should be up to individuals to decide whether they want to go ahead with trials on their property. She said that this is a matter of personal choice. It is clearly not a matter of personal choice, for the reasons I have just referred to. I want to draw the attention of the minister to some public opinion in her own electorate, which just happens to be my electorate as well. She would have seen the letter in the *Albany Advertiser* on Thursday, 12 March from John Robertson of Bayonet Head. The letter is headed "Don't trust the Minister on GM". It states —

You would think if the Great Southern was in the process of introducing a project to make us greater, there would be headline news, banners across York Street and—if we believe the proponents of the project—we would all be dancing in the streets.

Why, then, has Agriculture Minister Terry Redmond quietly authorised genetic food production experimentation to our region without all the fanfare?

Is it because the other regions such as Williams refused the trial because the documented proof is it is only an experiment and consequences of mistakes are calculated by 'who cares?'

I draw the attention of the government to that letter, which I am happy to make available. I also draw its attention to the Greenbushes branch of the Network of Consumers for GM Free Food, who have written to me putting up a very cogent argument for caution on this issue. Again, I am happy to share this information with the government if anybody is interested.

Question put and passed.

House adjourned at 9.12 pm
