A scandal over genetically modified food dominates New Zealand election campaign

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At the midpoint of the campaign for New Zealand's July 27 election, claims that the Labour-Alliance government engaged in an 18-month cover-up of the planting of genetically modified corn seed have come to dominate election coverage and political debates. The media, which previously described the campaign as dull, has latched onto the allegations, dubbed "Corngate," as the "defining issue" that calls into question the integrity of Prime Minister Helen Clark and her government.

The issue initially caught Labour off guard and provoked an angry outburst from Clark. TV3 first broke the story on July 10 in a special interview with the prime minister. She was not warned in advance by news anchorman John Campbell that she would be questioned on the contents of a newly published book, *Seeds of Distrust*, by journalist Nicky Hager. He claimed that in October-November 2000 the Clark government had tried to cover up a breach of the country's environmental laws, following the importation and accidental planting of up to 30,000 genetically modified sweetcorn seeds.

Clark abruptly declared mid-interview that she had been "ambushed" in a case of "unethical journalism". After threatening TV3 that she would boycott future election debates planned by the television channel, Clark then rounded on the Green Party, claiming it was the source of the scandal and accusing the Greens of "dirty" campaigning. Opposition to the genetic engineering field trials is the centrepiece of the Greens' campaign and the publisher of Hager's book is a Green list candidate. Clark said subsequent Green support for the allegations made her even more determined not to have them as a coalition partner after the election.

The scandal threatened to derail Labour's re-election strategy. The party is seeking to portray itself as a stable, dependable and scandal-free government. By maintaining a low-key campaign and avoiding controversy, Clark hoped to translate the party's 52 percent rating in the polls into an outright majority in parliament, thus avoiding the present need to rely on coalition partners. The revelations also served to undermine Labour's credibility as a government committed to carefully manage and control the introduction of genetic modification.

Hager's book deals with a shipment of seed that arrived in the country as part of a 5.6 tonne consignment from the United States supplied by the multi-national biotech company Novartis Seeds. It was split up between Heinz Wattie, Cedenco Foods and Talley's for planting and to seed distributor Seed Production. After almost half the seeds had been sown in the main horticultural areas of Gisborne, Hawkes Bay and Marlborough, a batch tested positive for genetic modification.

According to Hager, the government initially decided that the crops would have to be pulled up and destroyed, and regulations were hastily passed to enable this. However, following the advice of the Environmental Risk Management Agency (ERMA) and a subsequent re-analysis of the tests, the decision was reversed. Hager claims company lobbyists convinced officials, and via them the cabinet, to introduce a 0.5 percent "threshold" for genetically modified content. Conveniently, the tested consignment fell below that level. In support of his claims, Hager published extracts from internal ERMA memos revealing opposition within the organisation and concern that the government had sidelined the agency.

Environment Minister Marian Hobbs flatly denied the cabinet had agreed to any threshold. Research, Science and Technology Minster Pete Hodgson said the finding of subsequent tests in Australia on 49,000 seeds from the consignment were either negative or indeterminate. Environment secretary Barry Carbon and ERMA chief executive Bas Walker released documents to show there were "no reasonable grounds" to order the destruction of the plants. Carbon agreed there had been some "stuff-ups" in the way the matter had been handled, but that "by good management or good luck, it turned out that the crop—in the view of the experts—was not contaminated". While most of the information in Hager's book was "pretty accurate," he disagreed strongly with most of the conclusions.

A closer reading of the documents, however, lends weight to Hager's analysis. While there was a law in place barring imports of genetically modified materials, there was no testing regime and no procedure to enforce the law. The government only came to know about the problem when Cedenco brought its own test results to the attention of the relevant agencies. A recommendation was made to cabinet by officials to implement the arbitrary tolerance threshold—promoted by the US biotech industry—but the cabinet did not formally do so. In the meantime, decisions were made over a period of several months to keep the crop in the ground, using the 0.5 percent test as an "interim" threshold while discussions continued.

According to reports on National Radio's "Morning Report" program, intense commercial pressure was placed on the government to find a way to protect the crop. Not only was there a

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strong possibility of expensive lawsuits from the companies involved, destruction of the crop would have set a precedent which could have affected other industries. In the end, it was only subsequent analysis of the tests—the government appears not to have called for its own independent tests—which showed there was little likelihood of genetic engineering. The government released only very limited, generalised information about the matter so as not to tarnish the country's "GE free" reputation.

Labour's defensive response on the issue reflect divisions within ruling circles over genetic engineering, which involves significant financial and business interests. Agriculture, farming and horticulture account for over 50 percent of export earnings and the tourism industry is also among the top generators of foreign exchange. In all these areas, there has been a concerted attempt to market New Zealand as "clean and green"—environmentally friendly and devoid of any of diseases, such as BSE ("mad cow disease"), which have ripped through the European farming sector in recent years.

Labour, along with every other party except the Greens, supports some form of "controlled engagement"—that is, the use of, and research into, genetically modified foods with safeguards. Such an approach, with the emphasis on engagement rather than controls, is supported by sections of big business keen to reap the benefits of higher yields and easily marketable products. Last year the Labour government adopted the recommendations of a Royal Commission, which gave a cautious green light to the introduction of genetic modification in agriculture and horticulture. It provided for an initial period of controlled laboratory testing, with applications for commercial field trials to be allowed after October 2003.

The opposing view, endorsed by the Greens and supported by the $70 million organic food export industry among others, is that there are immense commercial benefits to be had by staying GE free. The Greens have signalled they will not co-operate with any government that allows the field trials to go ahead next year. Early in the election campaign, a group of "eminent citizens" calling themselves the Sustainability Council and led by former Federated Farmers President Peter Elworthy came out publicly in favour of extending the moratorium on field trials for another five years. The group, which claimed to have financial backing from unspecified business interests, specifically set out to challenge the current Federated Farmers leadership, which had declared itself in favour of the Royal Commission recommendations.

Among the wider population, there are legitimate concerns about the possible long-term effects of genetic engineering and unease that the involvement of major corporations will undermine any system of government safeguards. These fears, however, have been politically channelled by the middle class protest movement, which organised a 20,000-strong march for a "GE Free New Zealand" through Auckland late last year. The groups involved range from the Greens through to Mothers against Genetic Engineering (MADGE), led by former pop singer Allanah Currie and various radical groups, such as the Socialist Workers Organisation.

While the movement contains many diffuse currents, its leadership is backward looking and nationalist. Within the framework of the profit system, powerful business interests ensure that it is impossible to obtain an objective assessment of the benefits and dangers of genetically modified food let alone establish a rigorous system of safeguards for its testing and use. Rather than identifying the real source of the problem, the leaders of the anti-GE movement blame biotechnology and fail to even consider the potential benefits of improved yields and food types. Its insular approach to what is an issue that affects the world's population as a whole is summed up in statements by MADGE demanding the government "not allow the children of Aotearoa/New Zealand to be used by the biotech industry as human guinea pigs".

The fact that the "Corngate" affair has came to dominate the election campaign to the exclusion of other issues warrants consideration. It is uncharacteristic of the mainstream media to pay attention to Hager's journalism. He is regarded as a peace activist-cum researcher and his previous work on such issues as the US-New Zealand electronic spy network was largely ignored. The prominence of the issue reflects definite business interests, and its usefulness as a lightning rod, at least among some voters, for mounting discontent and hostility against the government and, more broadly, the entire political establishment.

The election contest has been characterised by almost complete policy unanimity between the contending parties and the absence of any debate on health, education or the growing social polarisation. It was left to the Council for Christian Social Services to complain that not one of the political parties wanted to discuss the country's rising levels of poverty. The council pointed out that one third of New Zealand children are brought up within families below the official poverty level.

In previous elections, Labour and the Alliance campaigned on very limited policies to lift living standards and to improve public education and health. None of the opposition parties have criticised the Clark government's failure to implement its promises nor pointed to the indices of a mounting social crisis. From the official campaign, one would not realise that over the past three years real wages fell, the public health system hit a funding crisis, student debt levels grew, public spending struck a 25-year low and the gap between rich and poor continued to widen.

The media and all the political parties, including the Greens, recognise the potentially explosive character of these burning social issues. Thus the official election campaign has taken on a rather peculiar, one-sided character, in which a scandal over genetically modified food, whatever its intrinsic merits, has been elevated to the exclusion of any wider debate on issues of broad concern to the majority of voters.

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