

Show Transcript
Deconstructing Dinner
Kootenay Co-op Radio CJLY
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Title: Bill C-517 – Mandatory Labelling of GE Foods (Part II, The Vote)

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Theme Music

Josh Brandon: Well clearly these aren't the people who should be representing Canadians on this issue. They're standing up in the House of Commons representing the interests of Monsanto. If they were to get themselves informed about this, then they could actually start to identify some of the concerns that thousands of Canadians legitimately have on this issue.

Jon Steinman: You're tuned in to Deconstructing Dinner produced at Kootenay Co-op Radio CJLY in Nelson, British Columbia. I'm Jon Steinman

The voice you just heard was Greenpeace Agriculture Campaigner Josh Brandon speaking following the May 7th vote in the House of Commons on Bill C-517 – which for those who missed our first episode on the topic – was calling for the mandatory labelling of genetically engineered foods. Today's episode will mark a shocking exposé into the statements made by Canadian members of parliament in the House of Commons during the May 5th debate that subsequently led to the May 7th vote. That vote resulted in the bill being voted down by all Conservative MPs and some Liberals.

Now this is an exciting episode of *Deconstructing Dinner* because having now covered this topic of genetically engineered foods for so long, we have now on many occasions exposed the sheer hypocrisy and misinformation that the large multi-national agricultural interests have placed into the media, into politics and into the mindsets of Canadians. Well today, we will hear of a whole new form of misinforming the Canadian public on this topic, and it unfortunately comes from a place where Canadians would hope only truth could be found, and that is from the House of Commons. On the show today we'll hear from Liberal Member of Parliament and Agriculture Critic Wayne Easter, Conservative MP Rob Merrifield and Greenpeace Agriculture Campaigner Josh Brandon.

Increase Music and Fade Out

JS: Two quick mentions before we embark on today's broadcast. The Cross-Canada cyclists featured on last week's show, who are using their trip across the country to raise

awareness of *Deconstructing Dinner* – are, as of Thursday May 22nd in Calgary Alberta – 15 days after they departed Victoria on May 7th.

During their recent stopover in Nelson I did interview both of them in our studios here, although we won't get around to airing that interview until a later date. But you can still stay updated on their progress by visiting their blog linked to from the *Deconstructing Dinner* web site at deconstructingdinner.ca

And also on our web site for those who haven't yet seen is a new ongoing project that we've launched for Canadian listeners, and it's called the Canadian Food Localization Directory – and the goal of the directory is for it to eventually become the most comprehensive directory on food security (or food localization) work taking place across the country. And the directory was inspired by the ongoing stream of emails that we get sent to us from listeners who have themselves been inspired by the content of the show to become more involved in choosing the most socially and environmentally responsible foods. And so it's my hope that the directory will act as a resource for people inspired by the content of this show, and if you see any listings missing or have a suggestion for the directory – you can send us an email at deconstructingdinner@cjly.net, and again the directory can be linked to from scrolling down on the main page of the *Deconstructing Dinner* web site.

soundbite

JS: Back on April 10th of this year we aired a segment on Bill C-517, an Act to Amend The Food and Drugs Act, and a bill which called for the mandatory labelling of foods containing genetically engineered ingredients. 517 was first introduced into the House of Commons in February of this year by Member of Parliament Gilles-A. Perron of the Bloc Quebecois, and was then debated on April 3rd by members of all parties. Now it was on that last show when we listened in on segments from the debate alongside a follow-up interview with Conservative MP Bruce Stanton. Since that show, and on May 5th, the bill was debated a second time, and on May 7th was voted on.

And so here is a clip of the May 7th vote, where we'll hear the names of just some of the Members of Parliament who were voting in favour of mandatory labelling of genetically engineered foods. **(fade in clip)** This clip begins with the parliamentary symphony orchestra that accompanies any breaks in the live broadcasts coming out of the House of Commons.

The Honorable Peter Milliken, House Speaker: Order, order. Order. The House will now proceed to the taking of the deferred record of division on the motion at Second Reading stage of Bill C-517, under Private Member's business. **(Voice of translator)** The question is as follows: M. Perron, seconded by M. Lucier, moves that Bill C-517, An Act to Amend the Food and Drugs Act -- Mandatory Labelling for Genetically Modified Foods, be now read a second time and be referred to the Standing Committee on Health.

(Full list of MP votes at:

<http://www2.parl.gc.ca/HousePublications/Publication.aspx?Pub=Hansard&Doc=90&Language=E&Mode=1&Parl=39&Ses=2>)

JS: Now it's at this point I'd like to introduce Josh Brandon. Josh is an Agriculture Campaigner working for Greenpeace and Greenpeace has been at the forefront of not only helping bring this bill into the House of Commons, but was incredibly active in rallying Canadians through emails and the Internet to write to their Members of Parliament asking them to vote yes on Bill C-517. Greenpeace even went so far as to take out some ad space in the recent issue of Corporate Knights – a Toronto-based quarterly magazine. The ad also called on Canadians to write to MPs asking for them to vote yes.

We will hear more from Josh Brandon later on the show, but first here's Josh speaking of their Bill C-517 campaign. Josh spoke to me from his office in Vancouver.

JB: Well, we've been mobilizing thousands of Greenpeace volunteers to contact their MPs to vote in favour of mandatory labelling, the Private Member's bill C-517, which would have provided mandatory labelling of genetically engineered foods had it passed. So we've gotten about a thousand report-backs from volunteers with the responses they got from their MPs, and we suspect that was just the tip of the iceberg. We've had notices from some MPs saying they had stacks of letters about the issue. We were mobilizing our volunteers; we've been working with all four parties, trying to get them to understand the issues behind mandatory labelling. In fact, we've been working on this issue for about ten years now, and I can't go through the list of actions that we've taken on this, but suffice it to say that we have been instrumental in getting recognition that mandatory labelling is crucial to give Canadians the right to know what's in the food that they're eating, and to protect themselves from the dangers of genetically engineered foods and to protect the environment as well.

JS: Now this information that Greenpeace was trying to disseminate to MPs clearly did not have an impact on every MP, and in this next clip from the May 7th vote, we hear just some of the names of those MPs who opposed this bill and voted no on the mandatory labelling of genetically engineered foods.

(Full list of MP votes at:

<http://www2.parl.gc.ca/HousePublications/Publication.aspx?Pub=Hansard&Doc=90&Language=E&Mode=1&Parl=39&Ses=2>)

JS: The last two names shared with you in that clip were of Liberal MP Wayne Easter and Conservative MP Rob Merrifield. In just a moment we'll listen in on segments from my interviews with both of them, but here's one more quick clip from the tally of votes on May 7th.

Female Voice: Yeas/Pour: 101, Nays/Contre: 156

Hon. PM: I declare the motion defeated.

JS: And again, if you didn't quite catch that, the final tally was 101 votes in favour and 156 votes against the bill. A link to a full list of votes has been posted on the *Deconstructing Dinner* web site if you're curious to see how your MP voted.

Now before we listen in on some clips from the May 5th debate and from my interviews with Rob Merrifield and Wayne Easter, I do want to place today's episode and what you're about to hear in context.

As mentioned in the show's introduction, we've long been exposing here on the show the sheer misinformation, the lies the outright hypocrisy that the world of big agri-business uses to advance their cause of pushing patented genetically engineered seeds onto Canadian farmers and into the food supply of Canadians. To date there are still many Canadians who have absolutely no idea that such experimental technologies even exist in our food.

And so it can be seen as an amazing success – in fact groundbreaking, that this topic has for the past couple of months been debated among Members of Parliament – our elected officials whose job it is to represent the interests of the people in their riding. Now this wasn't the first time that the topic was debated in the House of Commons, but it's certainly not often, and it certainly came at a time when the ingredients in the food of Canadians has become a hot topic.

And so while many MPs who lent their voice to the debate clearly maintained an understanding of what genetically engineered foods are, and who clearly recognized that polls have overwhelmingly shown that the majority of Canadians would like to see foods containing GE ingredients labelled, there were, on the other hand, some MPs who clearly have very little idea what genetically engineered foods are: certainly not a comforting thought when such a topic deals directly with the health of Canadians, and with the environment and social impacts of these crops.

Now of course Members of Parliament can't possibly be experts on everything which is why, in a debate on a specific topic, parties can choose certain MPs who are most knowledgeable to speak on that given issue.

And this is where Canadians may begin to get concerned, if you aren't already, because the first MP to stand up and speak in front of the House on May 5th was Rob Merrifield – the Member of Parliament for Yellowhead – an Alberta riding making up the area west of Edmonton out towards the BC border. Now on paper, Rob Merrifield seems like a good person to help influence other MPs to either support or oppose the bill, because Merrifield is not only a farmer but a farmer who has been growing genetically engineered crops for many years. Merrifield was first elected to the House in 2000 and was re-elected in 2004 and 2006. He has chaired the Health Committee and has been involved in the Health portfolio since he was first elected as a Member of Parliament.

Merrifield lives and Farms in Whitecourt, Alberta

Now I do want to note that in order to access some of the audio of the May 5th debate I did have to call up Parliamentary Television to access the archived clip as we weren't able to record it live as we did for our previous broadcast on this topic. And while Parliamentary TV was very cooperative in responding to the request, we did use a rather dated technology to get the audio from their office to me, and it involved someone on the phone in Ottawa holding up the receiver (of the phone) to a speaker in their studios so that I could then record this through the phone, and so needless to say, the quality of the recordings is not so great, but here's Rob Merrifield qualifying his statements and encouraging other MPs to trust what he's about to say.

Rob Merrifield: I thank you, Mr. Speaker, and it's a privilege for me to be able to rise and add my debate and voice from the people of Yellowhead to this piece of legislation, Private Member's Bill C-517. I have to also qualify a little bit of my remarks prior to proceeding. I have worked with genetic modified foods, I've farmed all my life. I've also worked with conventional grown crops, and have a background in understanding crop development and understanding how species grow, and what benefits may or risks may be there with regard to genetically modified foods. As I have had experience with growing them for several number of years.

JS: In helping introduce why Merrifield does not believe genetically engineered foods should be labelled, he suggested that such labelling would be misleading.

RM: On the first look at this bill, the question has to be asked: Well, what is the problem with labelling the food that is grown, and the products that are on our shelves in Canada? My argument is this, that if we are to label them, whatever label is on those products it has to be accurate and it can't be misleading. It's got to actually be there so it informs the consumer in Canada exactly what they are eating, and the risks that may or may not be associated with it.

JS: In even further stressing why such a labelling initiative would be harmful, Merrifield encouraged Canadians that GE Foods must be understood because otherwise Canadians will have little idea what the labelling means.

RM: With the genetic modified foods and what we're seeing develop in Canada and around the world, that we understand the risks, and perhaps the benefits. Because if we don't understand those, then we really are not fully understanding as a consumer what we are trying to do.

JS: Now I shared these previous clips with you because what you're about to hear is Rob Merrifield try and say why such labelling would be misleading by making a statement that not only is inaccurate and misleads the other MPs in the House and any Canadian paying attention to Parliament, but his statement clearly captures how unsure he is on what genetically engineered crops are.

RM: It's not only about the safety of food, it's about the environment. If I have a concern about genetic modified foods, it's not in the safety of the food. But it is in the environment, and making sure that we are not creating a super-plant that perhaps could get away from us, because there's ten groups of pesticides that we use on the farm—you start using one group, and then you get some resistance, some mutation that goes on in the plants, and you'll have to go to a different group of pesticides to be able to counter that. We have to make sure that the balance is there, that we not grow a super-plant that creates a problem in the environment, and that we get this super-plant that causes a tremendous lot of havoc in the agriculture community. That I am a little bit concerned about with genetic modified foods, but I am also very confident that Health Canada, and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, is watching that very closely. And I have not yet, to this date, seen a significant problem on that side. One of the reasons is because the technology has allowed a Terminator gene to be put in so that the new generation of those seeds that are grown are not allowed to be reproduced and to cause that kind of a problem. Now, I said earlier, we want to have truth in labelling.

JS: Now while Merrifield insists that there should be truth in labelling, it would also be comforting to know that there would be truth in statements made by Members of Parliament who are speaking on why the food supply of Canadians should not be labelled as containing such controversial ingredients.

As Merrifield indicated in the House, he's not concerned with any environmental risks of genetically engineered crops because, as he puts it, the crops contain a Terminator gene that ensures that the seed of that plant upon harvest will not germinate into a new plant and therefore won't contaminate other fields or develop into what he calls a super-plant.

Now there's a problem with this statement of assurance, because Terminator genes (otherwise known as genetic use restriction technologies) are not approved in Canada and have not been approved anywhere else in the world.

Take a listen again to his statement of May 5th, 2008.

RM: One of the reasons is because the technology has allowed a Terminator gene to be put in so that the new generation of those seeds that are grown are not allowed to be reproduced and to cause that kind of a problem.

JS: Now unless Rob Merrifield is illegally growing an unapproved technology here in Canada -- which I guess perhaps he is -- it's more likely that Merrifield is instead completely uninformed of what Canadian farmers including himself are growing on their farms.

Now because this statement was completely untrue and would have caused Members of Parliament to receive an inaccurate and misleading group of information prior to the vote two days later, I of course arranged an interview with Rob Merrifield, and he spoke to me from his office in Ottawa.

While I did save this question till the end of my conversation, let's just cut right to the chase and listen to his response.

JS: (From interview) Now my last question, just on the environment, is looking for clarification on one of your comments where you were indicating there is assurance that Canadians can have in any sort of environmental risks, because there is, as you said, a Terminator gene that has been inserted within plants. Now it's my understanding that Terminator genes are not yet approved in Canada. Can you clarify this statement?

RM: Well, these Terminator genes—maybe it's not appropriate to call it the Terminator gene, because I think it may have a little different definition, but it's a gene that you cannot keep—when I buy a canola seed, let's say, for this year, I can't use my own seed to reproduce it for next year; it won't grow the same because it'll get weaker, weaker, weaker and it'll die off on its own. So it's something that is in the genetic modified foods, where they're already careful to make sure that this plant cannot sustain itself and will eventually die off and not create the kind of super-plant that I was at one time worried about. I'm still concerned about it; I think it's important that we watch that. But I'm not alone, Health Canada, Agriculture, CFIA are watching these very carefully.

JS: Now it was at this point in my conversation that it became clear that Rob Merrifield was completely misinformed as to how the crops he plants function in his own fields, because as anyone who's listened to previous broadcasts of *Deconstructing Dinner* should already know, those statements you just heard are also untrue.

But I did instead chose to not continue my questioning, and I think because of how shocked I was, that here was perhaps one of the most glaring examples of not only how disconnected Canadian farmers have become from the very crops they're growing, but that there are farmers -- and I say this with the same amount of respect for every farmer in this country -- that have been so manipulated by corporate interests, so entrenched in the financial struggles that so many farmers face, that some have completely lost all knowledge of what they're actually growing.

Merrifield's statements even goes so far as to suggest that perhaps, this is exactly what seed companies like Monsanto or Bayer or Syngenta are telling farmers, that they should not replant their seeds the following year because they won't be viable, and should instead purchase their seeds from the company each and every year.

Back in February 2006 on one of our first ever episodes, we spent a full one hour exploring this controversial and unapproved Terminator technology and lending their voice to that show titled *Sterile Seeds* was the Vice-President of the Saskatoon-based National Farmers Union – Terry Boehm. Terry was recently featured in an excellent documentary feature that aired (surprisingly) on GlobalTV in March of this year titled *Hijacked Future*.

I sent Terry both the statement made by Rob Merrifield in the House of Commons and his subsequent attempt to clarify his statement over the phone. And I'll read to you Terry's response

"It is shocking and sadly representative of the degree of misunderstanding and myth that exists around genetically modified crops. We do not have Terminator genes in our seeds and hopefully never will. We do not have sterile seeds only because people have fought the introduction of these genetic use restriction technologies (GURTs) both here in Canada, and internationally. Mr. Merrifield seems to be taking legal seed sterility imposed through Technology Use Agreements, contract law, and more restrictive forms of Plant Breeder's Rights legislation and confusing it with biological sterility and hybrid breeding practices. What is particularly disheartening to all of us who recognize how important it is to keep farmers and citizens able to plant, reuse, exchange and sell seeds freely is that Mr. Merrifield as a member of Parliament and a farmer who is so ill-informed about the issues of seeds, that he would vote in ways to facilitate corporate control of seeds and food. Voting against labelling legislation is denying people the ability to make informed decisions about the food that they eat and further entrenching corporate control of food and seeds."

And again, those were the words of Terry Boehm, Vice-President of the National Farmers Union based in Saskatoon. To quickly expand on Terry's comments – he referred to Technology Use Agreements which are the agreements that seed companies demand farmers sign and which state that the farmer is not allowed to save their seed for the following year and must instead purchase the seed from the company. So Terry Boehm believes that Merrifield has confused biological sterility with the imposed sterility enforced through these Technology Use Agreements.

Now I did follow up with the Office of the Minister of Health Tony Clement to get his response on Rob Merrifield's statements. And unfortunately the Minister is overseas and I was unable to get a statement from him. But now in the hands of his Press Secretary are the following four questions:

1. What is The Minister of Health's position on the allegation in the House of Commons on May 5th that Genetic Use Restriction Technology (Terminator genes) have been approved and in the food supply?
2. What is The Minister of Health's position that when the MP making the statement was asked to clarify this allegation, that it was suggested that genetically modified crops are designed to not grow the same the following year because the seed will get weaker and weaker, and it will die off on its own?
3. What is the Minister of Health's position upon recognizing that Members of Parliament who are also farmers growing the foods in question are not adequately informed of what they are?

4. What is the position of the Minister of Health that the negating of this bill on May 7th was based partially upon misinformation presented in the House during the debating of the bill?

soundbite

JS: Now not only is this technology not approved anywhere in the world and certainly not in Canada – there even happens to be a Private Members Bill that was tabled last year by the Member of Parliament for this riding here in the home of *Deconstructing Dinner* – that is calling for a ban on the introduction of terminator seed technology. And that MP is Alex Atamanenko – the Critic for Agriculture, Agri-Food and Rural Affairs.

Now it has long baffled me as I'm sure many others, that farmers, would support operating their farms without any idea what they're growing and more importantly without having any freedom to save seed, or having any freedom to be the price maker instead of being the price taker.

And so perhaps as one would likely think – “well, maybe farmers are just making so much more money planting GE crops” – and maybe that's why they're so eager to support the technology and give up their sovereignty to a corporation.

So I asked this very question to Rob Merrifield, and sure enough, it does not appear that farmers such as Merrifield are making any more money than they were before such crops came onto the market. In his response, you'll hear him quickly deviate from addressing the income issue and instead his response quickly moves, to the topic of pesticides. Here's a segment from that interview.

RM: Actually, I was last Saturday, I was out on a tractor doing some seeding. But my oldest son has taken over the family farm, and so he does the bulk of it, I just have the thrill to go home and watch him from time to time, help him out a little bit.

JS: (from interview) Now one topic we discuss here on the program a lot is the farm income crisis, the state of economic health of farmers across the country, and certainly one of the arguments for planting genetically modified foods is that they have higher yields and can return more to the farmer. Now you've been, from what I understand, growing these crops for seven, eight years; are you able to provide somewhat of a comparison in your net income before and after planting these crops?

RM: Yes, I mean, it's not so much the net income but the volume of crop, because we've had a strong increase in the commodity prices this last year, so it's certainly going to help out the grain and oilseed industry. But what I used to grow--if you're talking about a canola--I if could grow a 25 or 30 bushel acre canola crop we thought that was very good, and last year our son grew some fields that got up to 80 bushel, but the average around 55. So that's almost a doubling of the volume of crop. But that's not what turns me on so much. When I was growing the canolas, I had to use two or three different types of chemical, none of which were very safe in my mind, and I'm more concerned about the

chemical that is being used. Today my son grows genetic modified crops, and the chemicals that are used are much safer, neutralize very quickly, there's not the residue—much safer products than what I had the opportunity to use.

JS: Now, what may come across as a concern upon hearing Rob Merrifield's comments is that while he's satisfied with the safety of the pesticides being used on genetically engineered crops, he's clearly not confident in the safety of those being used on non-genetically engineered crops, which of course still comprise the majority of agricultural crops being grown in this country. So here we have a Conservative Member of Parliament suggesting to Canadians that the measures designed in this country to protect the environment from dangerous agricultural chemicals are not adequate.

Merrifield's comments were echoed in the House of Commons when he shared the results of a study during the May 5th debate on Bill C-517.

RM: This was a study over fifteen years, four hundred different genetic modified products. It was studied in Europe, and the final analysis shows that the genetic modified food was healthier than the conventional because there's much less pesticide that was used, and much safer for the product in the long run as far as the health of the individual.

JS: Now first off, that statement is too, completely misleading in that the study he referred to in the House of Commons did not in absolutely any way conclude that genetically modified foods were healthier. This was a study on pesticide use, therefore one that applies to the environment and perhaps food safety concerns.

And here is yet again another comment he made in the House regarding his lack of confidence in the safety of the pesticides used on non-genetically modified crops.

RM: I am concerned, as a farmer and as a Canadian, about the amount of pesticides we use. When you use a genetic modified food, you are using the highest of technology as far as the new products of pesticides that are being used; you have virtually zero residual. Some of the pesticides that I used to use on the farm, some of them had seven year residual—the ability to stay in the soil for seven years before they would break down. Some of the new ones now are neutralized on contact. Tremendous advancements in the safety of the technology of the pesticides we use today compared to what has been used in the past.

JS: Now when I asked Rob Merrifield about this over the phone he referenced the same study that he had referenced in Parliament. However in his response, what we'll hear is that this study used in the House on May 5th to convince Members of Parliament that a bill to label genetically engineered foods is not necessary, was a study that also determined -- as he puts it -- that conventionally grown crops are more dangerous. Again, not a comforting remark for Canadians to hear.

RM: When we were going through this in Health Committee there was a study that we looked at out of Europe, four hundred different products, fifteen year study, that determined that conventional were more dangerous than genetic modified because of

pesticide that was being used. So I tend to think, if that was a European study, that they're very shy about genetic modified foods. It had a lot of credibility in my eyes.

JS: (from interview) Now I did want to ask you about that, because you did mention that within the House of Commons debate. And as maybe a listener or someone reading the transcript from this debate, or someone paying attention to the media, it appears that such a statement would suggest that pesticides--right now within Canada--are posing a risk to human health. Is this what people should be deriving from such a statement?

RM: Well, I don't think there's a farmer out there that likes pesticide. We use them, and there's a tremendous amount of safety precautions on those pesticides to make sure they're done appropriately. If the farmer follows the label and doesn't abuse the label, makes sure he takes the precautions, I don't think there's a risk.

JS: Now the operative word there was "if"--"If farmers follow the instructions". And while we're deviating from the topic of today's episode, it's quite startling that, while we hear the pesticide industry consistently assure Canadians that the Canadian government is adequately ensuring that pesticides are not dangerous and pose no risk to the environment if used properly – Conservative MP Rob Merrifield is, based on the fears he shared just moments ago, not convinced.

And this is important – because here we live in a country where a Member of Parliament of the political party in power and someone who has long been a farmer using pesticides, is concerned that the use and application of pesticides is unsafe, yet in this very same country – in Canada, we require farmers who are not using pesticides to fork out money to become certified as organic and to complete stacks of paperwork each year to prove that they're adhering to organic standards; not standards set on how to apply dangerous toxins and carcinogens into our soil, but standards for those who aren't!

And that's another topic for an upcoming show.

Listener Support Announcement

JS: This is *Deconstructing Dinner*, a syndicated weekly one hour radio show produced at Kootenay Co-op Radio in Nelson, BC. I'm Jon Steinman. On today's broadcast we're deconstructing the May 5th 2008 debate that took place in the House of Commons on Bill C-517. If you miss any of the show today or would like to learn more about today's topic you can visit our web site at deconstructingdinner.ca.

Now Bill C-517 was calling for the mandatory labelling of genetically engineered foods, and I say was, because on May 7th, the bill was voted down by 156 to 101 votes. But of course of greatest concern was, and has already been shared, was the utter misinformation and untrue assurances that Members of Parliament shared prior to the bill being voted on. In other words, this bill was voted down by MPs whose votes were founded upon false assurances.

And this helps introduce the next shocking statement made by both Rob Merrifield and other members of Parliament, in that it was admitted right in the House of Commons – that most Canadians don't even know what genetically engineered foods are, and that even MPs, likely don't know what genetically engineered foods are either.

Now this appears as the kind of statement that someone who supports labelling would use in a debate – that we have no idea what this stuff is so let's make sure Canadians can choose between what they know and what they don't.

Well, Rob Merrifield doesn't believe that, because he used this argument to insist that labelling is not necessary.

RM: My fear is that if we put a label on genetic modified foods, you have an electorate that doesn't quite understand what that means. In fact there's a real strong debate, I would suggest, in this room, by many Members of Parliament as well as many members of the public on what is a genetic modified food.

JS: The irony found in such a statement is of course that Rob Merrifield is one of those MPs who does not know what a genetically modified or engineered food is – now it likely wouldn't make any Canadian feel safe to know that the very MPs who are voting and debating on the health and safety of Canadians have absolutely no idea what they're voting on.

When I posed this question to Rob Merrifield he insisted that Canadians shouldn't worry – because next generation genetically engineered crops are on the horizon. Here's a clip from that interview.

JS: (from interview) Now one question that I did also pose to Member of Parliament Wayne Easter as well was: the tone from both debates in April as well as this recent one last week, it appeared that not only is it admitted that Canadians do not know much about genetically modified foods, but as in your statements even Members of Parliament may not know too much about genetically modified foods. And this seems to be probably the reason why this bill keeps coming through the House of Commons over and over and over. What are your thoughts on this unknowing of what genetically modified foods are, and does this not provide good enough reason for Canadians to know of clearly what's unknown?

RM: That's exactly my point. That's why to put a mandatory label on food would not be telling them what they need to know. If the public in Canada are concerned about genetic modified foods then what they really need to do is to buy organic and grow organic food. Then they can be assured that they're not getting genetic modified. But if most people don't understand what genetic modified foods are, we've been modifying for generations, and some of the new technologies are much safer. And what is even more, I think, valuable in this whole argument—which wasn't brought out very much—is the next generation of genetic modified foods, which will take us into higher vitamin As and Ds and value added to the crops that will save millions of lives around the world, where

nutrition is a major issue and is not as high a nutrition as available as it is in Canada. So not only are we growing better crops, but the next generation will facilitate healthier populations because of their use, and higher volumes as well. So it's all about information, and getting the right information to Canadians. And that's why it's important that we have these debates, and explain to Canadians that we are watching this, making sure that the products on the shelves are very safe.

JS: In just a moment we'll listen in on segments of my interview with yet another Member of Parliament who voted no on this bill and that was Liberal MP Wayne Easter. Now both Easter and Merrifield shared the same comment – that there's already a label to assure Canadians that foods are not genetically modified – and that label is the organic one. Now this suggestion of course leaves out a whole segment of the Canadian population –those who don't care to eat organic but also don't want to be part of the human experiment of eating genetically engineered foods.

But in raising another concern with such a suggestion, we can track back to a show we aired in January of this year which included a recording of the General Manager of Monsanto Canada, the world's largest supplier of genetically-engineered seeds, that this General Manager of Monsanto welcomes the day when genetically engineered organic foods will be on supermarket shelves.

Well seeing that this would negate any confidence in the organic label, I asked Rob Merrifield what he thought of such a prospect.

RM: Well, I think that if we're going to do that, then that's another market.

JS: Now I'll stop the clip there because if indeed Merrifield suggests that another market would have to be created – that is that we'll have conventional crops (including genetic engineering), organic crops and then genetically-engineered organic crops, wouldn't that not then require a label, a label that says: "this crop is organic and genetically engineered". Well, as I only realized after my interview, that's exactly what Conservative Member of Parliament Rob Merrifield then suggested. Take a listen

RM: Well, I think that if we're going to do that, then that's another market. Let's put it this way, we have a lot of restrictions on organically grown foods, that's why they get the labelling and they can claim that they're organic. They have to meet certain criteria. If they're going to move some of those to genetic modified, then I wouldn't be opposed to that, as long as it's labelled appropriately. **(playback loop)** as long as it's labelled appropriately. as long as it's labelled appropriately. as long as it's labelled appropriately, so that there's still the...

JS: Clearly this is the classic case of the right hand having no idea what the left hand is doing. Here we have a Member of Parliament standing up in the House of Commons opposing a bill that calls for the mandatory labelling of foods containing genetically engineered ingredients, and then, as you just heard, suggesting that if there was ever a

new market created for genetically engineered organic food, then the food would have to possess a label indicating the food is genetically engineered.

And here's the remainder of Merrifield's sentence

RM: ...as long as it's labelled appropriately, so that there's still the organically non-genetic modified for those who want to choose that. I think that's just freedom of choice, and I think the market will drive that, as to how much. Organically grown food is actually a growth market in Canada; I don't oppose it at all, I applaud it.

JS: Now keeping on this topic of organic food, we arrive at yet another interesting statement to deconstruct. Take a listen.

RM: If we're to put a label on genetic modified foods on every product in Canada, we'd be misleading the consumer. We'd be saying to the consumer that we're a little concerned about genetic modified foods or we wouldn't put it on a label, and it doesn't meet all of the safety standards—which it does.

JS: As MP Rob Merrifield suggests, a label to indicate that a food contains a genetically engineered ingredient would be sending the message to Canadians that the food is not safe. Well the Canadian government will be launching a Canada organic label at the end of this year, and using that same logic presented by Merrifield, that label would appear to suggest that non-organic food is therefore unsafe.

I asked this very question in my interview with Merrifield, but the response was not so direct.

RM: Well, there's a lot of reasons why people like organic, they don't use commercial fertilizers, they don't use pesticides, they don't have genetic modified, and they're not anywhere close to an area that has those. So there's a lot of criteria that go into an organically grown product, and have that label. There's some people that just think that that's healthier, it's back to nature from their perspective. And I don't argue with that, if there's those people who want to pay a little bit more for their product--because it does cost more to grow it—and have that choice I certainly applaud it, although I personally have no problem with the conventional foods, I believe they're equally as safe, and there is arguments there that they might even be more healthy than the organic. But that's just an opinion that I have; certainly in Canada we have the freedom to choose, and we must give those options to the consumer.

JS: So while Rob Merrifield believes in the “freedom to choose”, such a freedom in his case should not be granted to those wishing to choose between genetically engineered and non-genetically engineered food.

As mentioned in our previous broadcast on the topic of this bill, 91% of Quebecois want mandatory labelling and the freedom to choose and 83% of other Canadians so too demand such freedom of choice. But alas, those in the House of Commons representing

the interests of Canadians believe that they know best, and unfortunately, it appears they know very little.

In closing out my conversation with Rob Merrifield, I asked him that if so long as Canadians remain concerned with the known and unknown risks of genetically engineered crops, is he worried that this bill will continue to reappear in the House of Commons so long as no efforts are made to reassure the Canadian public.

And as if Merrifield and I were on different planets, he's convinced, as you'll hear in this next clip that it won't, because it's on shows like *Deconstructing Dinner* – as he suggests -- that can help put out the necessary information to assure Canadians that genetically engineered foods are safe.

RM: Well, I think every time the debate comes up we get stronger votes, and more information out into the public, stronger votes to support genetic modified foods. I believe they've been out there for twenty years or more, that we've never seen an incident or a problem with them at all. I believe that as we move into the next generation they'll even become more accepted, and the benefits of those new technologies will be appreciated, and people will become more understanding of them and accepting of them. And I believe the more we talk about this the more the public is informed; and that's the value of a program such as yours, that it's going to benefit not only the consumer, but alleviate a lot of fears of people that are concerned.

soundbite

JS: There were some Liberal MPs who did too oppose the bill. Again the final vote was 101 for the bill and 156 against it.

One of those Liberal MPs opposing the bill was Wayne Easter who is also the party's critic on Agriculture and Agri-Food. Easter represents the riding of Malpeque which is the central part of Prince Edward Island. Easter was raised on a farm and attended the Nova Scotia Agricultural College. He was first elected as the MP in 1993 and has been re-elected ever since. Wayne has been very involved in Canadian agricultural issues and has long supported the principles of globalization and free trade with respect to food. Wayne spoke to me over the phone from his office in Ottawa and he commented on the May 5th debate on Bill C-517.

Wayne Easter: Well I thought we had a reasonable debate. There are the two sides of the issue out there. I am concerned, though, about what I call how some people who want the labelling of genetically modified foods, how they play the politics of fear, and I think I've mentioned that in some of the remarks I've made. Because when you ask them to provide me with an illustration of the supposed concern on human, animal or environmental health, and there's never really any answers coming forward.

JS: Now when standing up in front of the House it was clear that Wayne Easter had the corporate seed industry in mind. Within his speech he shared a statement made by the

Canadian Seed Trade Association that represents the major manufacturers of genetically engineered seed. And their statement was this, “we believe that if enacted, the provisions of this bill could have a very detrimental effect on the ability of our members to continue to deliver innovative products.”

And so I asked Wayne Easter that if the industry’s products are so innovative, why is it that they don’t label them to indicate how innovative they really are?

Now hypocrisy in the world of politics is nothing new, but this one I think takes the cake, because as Wayne Easter indicated just a moment ago that he’s frustrated with the politics of fear that has led to this bill in the first place, take a listen to how he himself uses fear to suggest why the bill should not have been adopted.

WE: Because, I think, of the attack, to a certain extent, on genetically modified--the politics of fear that some are playing. First of all, when you go to this kind of labelling, can we segregate that within our system at the grocery store level? What’s the cost of that? I mean the costs, I’ve been told, could be pretty outrageous. I could argue with those that want this labelling: are they in favour of increasing the cost of food as much as ten percent? Are they in favour of using more herbicides and pesticides, polluting our land, and our waterways, and our streams? Are they in favour of using more diesel fuel and pumping more greenhouse gasses in the air? Because that would be the net impact if we did away with the genetic modifications that are there. And so there’s two sides to that story. And if those that play in the politics of fear, that there’s something wrong with this product even though it’s passed all the safety tests, and all the health and safety standards that Health Canada and other agencies provide—I mean, this is reviewed by three different government agencies—then there’s the dilemma that you face with that kind of labelling.

JS: Now as Wayne Easter used the very politics of fear he was objecting to earlier, as he did, he echoed the comments made earlier by MP Rob Merrifield in that crops that are not genetically engineered are in fact damaging to our soil, our water our air, and essentially is too, suggesting that Health Canada and Agriculture-Agri-Food Canada are not doing an adequate job in helping protect our natural surroundings and our health. Let’s not forget that GE crops only represent a minority fraction of all foods grown in this country.

Now what has long been feared by opponents to GE Foods, is that the food supply would get so reliant upon genetically engineered foods, that the argument would eventually be used that nothing can be done now that most foods on supermarket shelves contain these ingredients. That was exactly the answer I received when I asked Easter why it is Canada is unable to enact mandatory labelling when over 40 other countries require such labelling including the European Union, Japan, China, Australia and New Zealand.

WE: When you look at some of these other countries, especially the European Union, they are now saying that the product is safe, they’re kind of backing away from it, although they’ve moved that way. The difference between where they’re at and where

we're at as a country, they imposed those kind of restrictions and that labelling well in advance as these products were coming on stream. These products are already on our grocery store shelves, nobody can show us any adverse health effects that has happened as a result. And so to me it's imposing an unnecessary cost when you're really not going to learn anything substantive by that label.

JS: Member of Parliament Wayne Easter uses the word “imposed restrictions” to describe how foods were labelled in Europe. Now here is where Easter’s agenda becomes quite clear, because the only people who would have seen such labelling as being imposed on them, were the handful of multinational corporations supplying the European market with food. On the contrary it was the people and their political representatives in Europe who demanded such foods be labelled. This labelling was in no way imposed as Easter suggests, and on the contrary, it has been this very country Canada – that has been working towards imposing the genetically engineered agenda on Europe. Journalists Murray Dobbin and Ellen Gould authored a good article on this back in January of this year for the on-line news magazine *The Tyee*, and they wrote extensively on how aggressive the Canadian government has been in previous years in trying to challenge the restrictions placed on genetically engineered food in Europe.

Now similar to MP Rob Merrifield, Liberal MP Wayne Easter also believes in the intent of the bill but does too suggest that there are alternatives. During his speech in the House of Commons, Easter stated this, “there are other and better ways of addressing the intent of this bill.” And I asked him to expand on his ideas.

WE: Well, I think the main one is that way. There’s also a secondary level, and that is you could go to voluntary labelling. We had a product in Prince Edward Island which was really ten years ahead of its time, and it was called Island Natural Pork. And that particular pork was grown to the greatest extent possible without genetic modification in terms of the inputs into that hog production.

JS: Now the Island Pork example is not really an example at all because all that business is doing is labelling their product as not containing GE ingredients, and Josh Brandon of Greenpeace will speak to that in just a moment. And as I did with Rob Merrifield, I also posed to Wayne Easter the statement made by Monsanto Canada’s General Manager that he would welcome the day when genetically engineered organic food would be on supermarket shelves. Wayne Easter does not support such an idea.

Wayne spoke to over the phone from his office in Ottawa.

Now as mentioned at the top of the hour, Greenpeace has been actively involved in raising awareness of Bill C-517 which was calling for the mandatory labelling of genetically engineered foods. The bill was voted down on May 7th. Helping share their efforts in raising such awareness was Vancouver-based Agriculture Campaigner Josh Brandon, and in bringing us to the close of the hour, we’ll listen in on more segments from my phone conversation with Josh, starting with his comments on this May 5th House of Commons debate that has formed the basis for today’s show.

Josh Brandon: Well, I think a lot of the people that were speaking about the issue, certainly the Bloc and the NDP and also some of the Liberals that spoke about the issue seemed quite well informed. And I think some of the work that we've been doing has shown through on that. There's a much higher degree of awareness about what genetic engineering is, for starters. I think that's one of the big challenges that we've found throughout this process is we've been getting a lot of reports, particularly from Conservative MPs like Scott Reid, for example, who've been saying that, you know, we don't need genetic engineered food to be labelled because we actually don't even know what it is. And then they confuse it with saying that we've had genetic modification for thousands of years and yeast is genetically modified, which is really missing the point because genetically engineered foods have really only been part of our food system for ten years; it's an ongoing experiment that we don't know what the results are, for our health down the road, or the health of our...

JS: As was one of the most shocking admissions made by Members of Parliament in the House of Commons was how they along with most Canadians know very little if anything of what GE foods are. And Josh comments on these remarks.

JB: Right, well, clearly these aren't the people who should be representing Canadians on this issue. They're standing up in the House of Commons representing the interests of Monsanto. If they were to get themselves informed about this, then they could actually start to identify some of the concerns that thousands of Canadians legitimately have on this issue. You know, poll after poll shows that eighty to ninety-five percent of Canadians want GE food to be labelled. Those concerns are quite justifiable because even our MPs don't know what genetically engineered food is, so how can we trust that Monsanto's going to be giving us the full results of their test trials, how can we trust that this is going to be proven safe thirty years down the road? We've seen this again and again with industrial products from DDT onwards that they've been getting into our food supply and then we don't know what the ultimate results will be.

JS: And that was Josh Brandon, an Agriculture Campaigner for Greenpeace. Josh spoke to me on the phone from his office in Vancouver.

And so if there's anything positive that can come out of the debate that took place as a result of Bill C-517 being tabled in the House of Commons, it's clear that such dialogue encourages Members of Parliament to learn more about what genetically engineered foods are, and it exposes to Canadians how clueless some MPs continue to be.

A number of links to the transcripts from the debate along with a link to our first broadcast on this topic back in April, will be linked to from the *Deconstructing Dinner* web site at deconstructingdinner.ca

And I would like to play one more clip for you here that was first played on last week's show and it's one of President George W. Bush speaking on May 1st from the White House. As we've highlighted on today's show how much information is circulating

around Canadian politicians who are addressing the issue of genetic engineering, I thought a little visit south of the border could help emphasize how this misinformation just doesn't stop here.

Here's President Bush encouraging countries around the world to ease their restrictions on biotech or genetically engineered crops in order to solve world hunger.

George W. Bush: I call upon them to end those restrictions, to help ease suffering for those who aren't getting food. We're also urging countries to remove barriers to advanced crops developed through biotechnology. These crops are safe, they're resistant to drought and disease, and they hold the promise of producing more food for more people.

JS: Now the only problem with Bush's statement is that it's not true. There is not one crop that has yet been commercialized that is drought resistant. Not one. And as for disease resistance – there are only two – a papaya variety and a squash variety, both of which are only used sparingly around the world.

soundbite

WE: (played over soundbite) Well I thought we had a reasonable debate. I am concerned, though, about what I call how some people who want the labelling of genetically modified foods, how they play the politics of fear. I could argue with those that want this labelling: are they in favour of increasing the cost of food as much as ten percent? Are they in favour of using more herbicides and pesticides, polluting our land, and our waterways, and our streams? Are they in favour of using more diesel fuel and pumping more greenhouse gasses in the air? Because that would be the net impact if we did away with the genetic modifications that are there. I am concerned, though, about what I call how some people who want the labelling of genetically modified foods, how they play the politics of fear.

That was this week's edition of Deconstructing Dinner, produced and recorded at Nelson, British Columbia's Kootenay Co-op Radio. I've been your host Jon Steinman. I thank my technical assistant John Ryan.

The theme music for Deconstructing Dinner is courtesy of Nelson-area resident Adham Shaikh.

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