



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE

**AUSTRALIA NEW ZEALAND
FOOD AUTHORITY
AMENDMENT BILL 1999 [NO. 2]**

In Committee

SPEECH

Tuesday, 7 December 1999

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Date Tuesday, 7 December 1999
Page 11336
Questioner
Speaker Stott Despoja, Sen Natasha

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Senator STOTT DESPOJA (SA) (6.07 pm)—Firstly, I commend Senator Harris on his contribution. He did not get an opportunity to give a speech in the second reading debate. I congratulate you, Senator Harris, for putting some of those issues on record. The example of soya beans and certainly the case of Monsanto illustrate wonderfully the social, health, environmental and even cultural issues that we are dealing with in relation to the debate about genetically modified foods—GMOs—more generally and specifically in relation to labelling.

I thank the minister for his response to my amendment and I do acknowledge, as indeed the previous speaker did, the work of ANZFA in relation to current education activities. I certainly commend the web site. I am very happy to hear that there are lots of hits on that site. That is very important and certainly so is the booklet. I commend Senator Tambling on the launch of the booklet. That was very savvy marketing, Senator Tambling. I almost expected you to say, given this is a food debate, 'Here is one I prepared earlier,' and flash that around. But prescriptive? How can this be prescriptive? This talks about including the publication of information to increase public awareness of food standards and food labels. This is not restricting them; this is not prescribing these things only. It is including them. I think to describe that as prescriptive is truly extraordinary.

Earlier, in the second reading debate stage, the minister mentioned that this is the first phase. The Democrats acknowledge that. The issue of biotechnology is a huge issue that confronts Australians and the world. I understand there are other regulatory regimes being considered or put into place. I talked about the office of the gene regulator. All of these issues will have to be dealt with. I look forward to not only the ensuing debate on food labelling and genetically modified organisms but the broader biotechnology debate. However, the Democrats would have more confidence in the statements from this government—this is the first stage, there is a lot happening and there is reason for public confidence—if we had not seen what I view as a rather short-sighted approach to this debate in the contemporary history of this parliament. People would be more than aware of the Democrats' attempts on at least two occasions to set up some kind of committee reference on these broader biotechnology issues.

Indeed, on the *Notice Paper* now there is another opportunity for the government and the opposition to broadly discuss these issues of biotechnology in a debate that we will have this week, I hope. People would be aware that I have moved that we should have a Senate select committee investigating some of these biotech issues and looking at issues like the implementation of the labelling of genetically modified foods and products. We should be looking at the precautionary principle. We should be looking at environmental health and social, cultural, religious—if you like—and moral consequences, because all of these things are bound up in this debate. It is not about being sensationalist; it is not about scaremongering; it is not about perpetuating fear in the community. The last thing we want to see are the kind of 'Frankenfoods' headlines that we have seen in places around the world. It is about recognising some of the fears that the community has. But it is not just fear; it is also that consumers get very angry when they do not have adequate information. I do not think consumers necessarily want to reject GMOs. But I do think they want to know when they are buying them and when they are eating them—when they are putting them into their bodies, when they are ingesting them in some way. I think as consumers they have that right.

I think this government should learn from overseas examples. We have seen what has happened in Europe and specifically in places like the UK. I realise there is perhaps a different cultural and political environment there. Certainly, when you look at issues like BSE, perhaps there are reasons that they have reacted more strongly than other parts of the world. But I do not think we can afford to ignore those kinds of very human, public, angered, sometimes almost activist and even terrorist actions and responses to the GMO debate. It is a responsible government that takes on board those issues, and not just within the context of ANZFA or the gene regulator. There is a need for a committee inquiry into this that not just brings into this debate the health professionals, the scientists and the experts but actually involves the public, perhaps very much in the same way that the consensus conference did earlier this year in Old Parliament House in Canberra.

I take on board that this is perhaps the first phase. But that is no excuse to settle for lowest common denominator standards on a domestic or international level. It is no reason to be seen to, effectively, substitute codes of practice for standards. The minister, in response to my first amendment, stated that it was pretty obvious that a code of practice is not a standard. If it is so obvious, why are people worried about this? Why would we seek to make this clear? It is to give consumers as well as industry professionals some confidence in this legislation. I thank the Labor Party for their support on the first and second amendments and, similarly, the Independent senators. Please, let us take on board some of the lessons of other countries, even countries close to home across the Tasman. Let us not try and fool ourselves, this chamber and the public at large that somehow this is a prescriptive amendment.