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Background Notes On Seeds of Distrust

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Article: Nicky Hager - Researcher

Background notes on *Seeds of Distrust* by Nicky Hager.

Is this an anti-genetic engineering book?

This is not a book for or against genetic engineering. It is about issues of accountability and open government, in the context of the controversial GE issue. The main theme is that decisionmaking about a contentious new technology like genetic engineering needs to be built upon openness and a public belief that those in charge can be trusted. That is what the current Government says too, but not what it did in the case of the contaminated sweet corn.

Is this a political book, deliberately timed for the elections?

Any journalist who came upon this story would use it. Nicky Hager first heard the story earlier this year while doing research for another book. He began to investigate it, initially for an article and then he decided it was too big for an article and began writing the book. He hoped it would be finished well before the election. When the Government called the snap election, he had to decide whether to finish it quickly or leave it until after the election. The issues raised seemed too important to leave.

Is the book trying to help the Green Party against Labour Party?

No. This is the kind of subject Nicky Hager usually researches and writes about. He published books on issues of Government secrecy and lack of accountability before both the 1996 and 1999 elections, when the National Party was in power.

Concerning the contaminated crops: no one died, what's the problem?

This is not a 'shock, horror' dangerous food story. The book does not present evidence that eating the GE sweet corn would have harmed anyone. The effect on the environment is unknown. The story is important for other reasons. People had a right to know about the sweet corn and make their own choices whether to eat it (this is particularly the case with Maori people who feel strongly about genetic engineering). The authorities go to huge efforts to stop any GE pollen or seeds escaping from small field trials, because of lack of understanding about the long-term environmental effects. Yet in this case – the largest known release of GE plants ever into the New Zealand environment – the Government decided not to have the plants removed (which initially it made arrangements to) and did not even tell neighbouring farmers and residents.

Perhaps the Government decided that the GE sweet corn was not a threat and so it could be left in the ground...

New Zealand has a strict statutory process for any release of genetically engineered organisms – the Hazardous Substances and New Organisms Act. The Government had no authority to ignore those procedures and make ad hoc decisions about the sweet corn. What is the point of an agency like ERMA if the Government simply bypasses it when it feels like it?

The Government will argue that the GE contamination tests initially showed contamination but that later analysis showed that it could not be said with certainty whether or not there was contamination.

If the Government decides to evade the issue, this is likely to be the argument. It may say the contamination was 'negligible' or the evidence unclear. There was no question of contamination. Although contamination percentages sound small (just parts of a percent), there were at least 15,000 -30,000 GE plants in the environment. Under New Zealand law, even one GE plant (once known about) was illegal and should have been dealt with. But the Government chose to fudge the issues. There is a full chapter of the book looking at the ways that the scientific results were bent to political ends.

The Government had two legitimate options: a) destroying the crops using the powers of the Biosecurity Act or b) making a formal application to ERMA under the Hazardous Substances and New Organisms Act to legitimise possession of the GE sweet corn. It did neither of these.