



Speech by

Hon. PETER BEATTIE

MEMBER FOR BRISBANE CENTRAL

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MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Biotechnology

Hon. P. D. BEATTIE (Brisbane Central— ALP) (Premier) (9.42 a.m.), by leave: A leading Victorian biotechnology researcher says my Government's 10-year strategy to make Queensland a leading biotechnology hub in South-East Asia is already having an effect. The director of the Howard Florey Institute of Experimental Physiology and Medicine, Professor Fred Mendelsohn, says our commitment of \$270m over 10 years is already influencing key decision makers and leading researchers.

Victoria's leading newspaper, the Age, says—

"Biotechnology, which embraces drug design and genetic engineering, has been hailed as the science of the new millennium, and Melbourne has been its Australian leader."

Now, says the newspaper, our policy is starting to bite. It says that Professor Mark von Itzstein, the developer of the anti-flu drug Relenza, and his research team have moved from their Victorian laboratory to one of Queensland's new biotechnology research institutes.

The Age says—

"Some Victorian scientists are being diplomatic about such losses, arguing that Queensland's boost to biotechnology will bring benefits for all Australians."

Others argue that it would be better if increased employment and a stronger economy were bestowed on Victoria as a result of investment in biotechnology."

The director of the Baker Institute for Medical Research, Professor John Funder, is calling our investment in biotechnology "far sighted". He is right. He is a member of the Science, Engineering and Technology Task Force which gives advice on science policy and expenditure to Jeff Kennett. Another of its members is Professor Adrienne Clark, the co-chair, who says our investment—that is, Queensland's investment—in biotechnology would be good for Australia. Professor Mendelsohn says that Victoria has not lost the race yet. But, he says, the writing is on the wall that they need to urgently respond to what is happening in Queensland.

My Government will continue to develop our biotechnology capabilities so that not only do we attract eminent researchers from Victoria but from all over the world. In this way not only Queensland but all Australia will benefit from this technology of the next millennium.

It is appropriate that I also mention today the article on the front page of the Courier-Mail, headed "Hidden genes in everyday food", which stated—

"More than 60 percent of the food on supermarket shelves potentially contained genetically modified ingredients, Woolworths Queensland general manager Bernie Brookes said yesterday."

Mr Brookes confirmed that common sweets and baby food, including M & Ms, Maltesers, Mars Bars and Heinz Baby food contained products that had been genetically modified."

The list goes on. The article continues—

"He said Queenslanders would be eating genetically modified food every day but they had no way of knowing exactly which foods had been altered."

And many major manufacturers, such as Continental, Heinz, Buttercup, Meadow Lea, Pampas, Uncle Toby's, Watties and Arnotts, could not tell whether their foods contained GM ingredients."

That is the truth. It is important that we have an informed and educated debate about genetically modified food. I am concerned generally about a number of alarmist headlines and stories that I have seen. When talking about genetically modified food, we have to understand that humans have been eating genetically modified food for thousands of years. Ever since we got out of the trees, we have been modifying food. If you think about it—

Ms Bligh: Some are not out of the trees!

Mr BEATTIE: I know that some in this House have come out of the trees more recently than others. I accept that. For those on this side of the House, who have indeed been out of the trees for a long time, I want to make a very serious point about this. As a species we have been modifying food since we came out of the trees. If you think about it, when Adam and Eve were around, there were not the special breeds of dogs or horses or cattle or the grains of wheat or merino sheep. The list goes on and on. We need to be aware that we have modified our grain and we have modified our livestock. The wheat, sheep and cattle that we grow today bear little resemblance to the wheat, sheep and cattle of even two centuries ago.

Let us not be alarmist in this debate about biotechnology. Biotechnology will be the greatest shot in the arm for primary industries in this State that we have ever seen. That is why it is absolutely essential that the media contains its normal exuberance for alarmism and has a sensible debate about this issue. As I say, there needs to be a sensible education program through the media, not headlines that cause people to worry unnecessarily.

As to labelling, we should have some truth in labelling and state that every product that we eat has been, somewhere along the line, genetically modified.
