



Speech by

**KAREN STRUTHERS**

**MEMBER FOR ALGESTER**

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Hansard 18 October 2001

### **GENE TECHNOLOGY BILL**

**Ms STRUTHERS** (Algeria—ALP) (6.30 p.m.): The widespread application of gene technology has unleashed a range of emotions amongst the public. Many fear the unknown and even the known. Many people are curious while others are fearful. Some people are excited and are scrambling to be a part of the action. A solid ethical and regulatory framework is a must. Minister Paul Lucas has embraced his responsibilities. He has shown a real enthusiasm not only for the content of his portfolio area but also for the ethical standards associated with emerging industries. I commend him for bringing this bill to the House.

I remind the minister of some of the fears being expressed. I ask that he ensure that this regulatory and ethical framework be given real teeth. For instance, research that was done in 1999 by Dr Katrine Baghurst found that 58 per cent of the participants in the study said that they knew little about gene technology and its use in the food chain; 52 per cent felt that the risks of genetic engineering would outweigh the benefits; and 93 per cent supported government control of GE foods. It was of concern to me that the more people learn about genetically modified foods, the less they support them. Some real issues exist, possibly as a result of a lack of knowledge or a lack of understanding of how these technologies are being applied. People have some real concerns. It is important that the public has confidence in the regulatory system and the ethical frameworks that are being developed at the national and state levels. As I said earlier, the minister has a responsibility to give those systems some teeth.

Some of the possible risks identified with gene technology, as outlined by the Office of the Gene Technology Regulator in June 2000, include increased health risks associated with allergenicity in genetically modified foods, possible unknown long-term or intergenerational consequences that may not be able to be adequately addressed once the GMO is widely used and the risk to Australia's capacity to maintain diverse farming practices because of the impact of contamination to traditional or organic crops through the use of genetically modified crops in surrounding areas. The regulator lists many other risks.

Some vegetarian friends of mine have even told me that they fear that they are consuming vegetables that have been modified with animal proteins and they may never know about it. They are concerned that they are eating food that they are not sure about. Some of us have some very practical concerns. In addition, there are broader non-scientific, moral and ethical concerns about the impact of humans playing God by using gene technology. Those are very real concerns. I want to put them on the record again today.

On the other hand, we have a government that is very committed to jobs growth and economic development. We have some very exciting developments occurring in these areas. Given the invitation by the minister, I went and saw the good work that is being done in cancer research at the Centre for Immunology and Cancer Research at the PA Hospital, run by Dr Ian Frazer and his team. I took Dr Carmen Lawrence there a couple of months ago. It is amazing and exciting stuff that has a very positive application in cancer treatment, particularly with cervical cancer. Having raised some concerns, I put on the record that there are some very exciting developments taking place.

As a government that is committed to jobs development, we recognise the very exciting emerging industries and possibilities that exist in this field. We have embraced that. We have made

significant financial commitments in a number of key areas. For example, the biotechnology industries have benefited from the \$15 million Queensland Biodiscovery Fund. There are many other initiatives that the minister is developing around the state to give these industries a real push along.

As I have said, this is certainly an area that we can benefit from. We have to be at the forefront of this area, but that has to be balanced against the sorts of concerns and fears that the public has. A number of strategies have been proposed in order to deal with some of those concerns. The minister certainly has been picking up on a number of them. The science technology and resources group has done a fair bit of work in this area. It recommended some immediate requirements in order to restore or maintain public confidence and appease people's fears. These included strategies involving food labelling that can be trusted, adequate education programs so an informed public can make intelligent choices, and an agriculture biotechnology strategy supported by a coordinated agency and dedicated separate agencies that, with no conflict of interest, can pursue and represent competing interests. Those interests include health and consumer food and drug requirements, environmental risks that can damage our valuable agricultural industry, risks to biodiversity through accidental escapes and many other things that I know that, from my discussions with him, the minister is well aware of.

I commend the minister's work in this regard. I encourage him to maintain vigilance in this area. He certainly has my support in giving this whole regulatory and ethical regime solid and real teeth.

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