

## WHY WE MUST BE BOLSHIE

*Colin reflects on the need for a people's takeover*

I have acknowledged late in life that I am a bolshie. Bolshiness at its worst is what it says in the dictionary: combativeness for its own sake; an innate non-cooperativeness. But bolshies properly conceived are not like that. They're just people who feel that the powers-that-be, whoever the powers-that-be might be at any particular time, should not be given an easy ride, and certainly not carte-blanche. Despite their robes and decorations and general orotundity they don't necessarily know what they are doing – and if they nonetheless assume authority, I am not sure that their ignorance should be forgiven. Far more often than not, people left to themselves would do a far better job than they do when hectored from above for reasons of dogma and ideology. It isn't always obvious, either, that “they” (the powers-that-be) are necessarily on the side of the rest of us. Elected governments, let alone dictators, often seem to be primarily on their own side, or on the side of the special chums who helped to put them in power.

In agriculture worldwide ignorance and self-interest in high places are all too obvious -- and outstandingly so in Britain and the US; and since agriculture is so important they are especially damaging. No-one should look for a fight with the powers-that-be – it's a waste of precious time and energy and anyway the powers-that-be often have something useful to offer in the short term. But it is vital, if we truly care about the human condition and the future of the world, to wrest authority from them: to make sure that our food supply is controlled as Abraham Lincoln put the matter, by the people and for the people – partly for moral reasons, but partly because we, people at large, could undoubtedly do the job far better.

We need, in short, a People's Takeover. There are serious experts and intellectuals in high places whose input is very necessary. But that expertise must be deployed for the common weal – not, to put the matter crudely, to make fat cats fatter, or to increase the influence of people who already have far too much. Yet that is precisely how it has been used more and more this past 30 years – ever since Mrs Thatcher put a stop to nationwide independent agricultural research in Britain, and “free-market” economics, neoliberalism, became the universal dogma.

I wish to point no fingers: no names, no pack-drill; and many of the people who might feel they are in the firing-line are actually well-motivated – at least wanting to benefit humankind – and truly expert in their field. Even so, when I hear them speak in high places, and read their earnest editorials, I can't help reaching for my metaphorical pitchfork.

Thus I know an excellent scientist who seeks to identify all the genes in all the world's major crops and their wild relatives. With my biologist's hat on, I feel this is wonderful. The insights gained would surely be momentous. What a resource, too – with huge implications both for farming and for conservation (and indeed for thinking of the two together, which is what should be happening). We can see, indeed, how detailed knowledge of living creatures at the level of the genes – nothing less than the natural history of wild genes – would give us a quite new view of life, with endless implications. Knowledge can always be misused but knowledge per se (surely?) can never be bad.

Yet such a study, desirable though it surely is, will do nothing to help humanity or the world out of our present plight. It's 150 years since Mendel first mooted the "factors" that we now call genes and at least two centuries since plant and animal breeders first suspected that some such things must exist. It's nearly 40 years since the term "genetic engineering" was first coined yet, frankly, we are still in the foothills – the present-day commercial forays are so worrying partly because they are so obviously premature; it's all being done on a suck-'em-'n'-see basis, with the hope of a quick buck. It could easily be another century before we harvest any serious fruits from grand-scale genomic research. So although this is among the best publicly sponsored research in biology, and can properly be called agricultural science since it is focused on crops, it is not directly pertinent; and by the time it is of direct use to farmers, we will have solved our problems by other means – either that or most of us, and our fellow creatures, will already be wiped out.

Right now, as a matter of supreme urgency, we need ways of growing present-day crops abundantly and reliably, without wrecking the rest of the world. One approach is to grow mixtures of existing varieties, ancient and/or modern, for example of wheat. This is being tried on the small scale by private individuals. It should be tried out on the national and international scale using as much tax-payers' money as it takes. Instead, many of the world's best-qualified scientists are busy laying the intellectual foundations for Monsanto and their ilk to make a fortune sooner rather than later while others (like my truly admirable friend) have

their eyes fixed on stars that alas are too distant to help the world in its present plight.

So the most vital work *has* to be done by private individuals, scratching for funds, while, in effect, the powers-that-be are spending our money on enterprises that are less than urgent or with very dubious benefits that indeed could be positively harmful. This, by any measure, is a disgrace. Certainly it should prompt us to ask, “What exactly does our government think it is *for*? By what right does it collect taxes at all, if not for the common good?” Fiddling expenses is small beer, the merest peccadillo, compared to the wholesale squandering of public resource on enterprises that at best are useless and at least as often as not are seriously damaging.

Vital, too, is to find ways of growing crops without massive inputs of agrochemicals, which have been used more and more particularly since the 1930s when DDT came on line. The agrochemicals are oil-based and even governments now realize that must run out in any case and will be too dear long before it does; and the industrial inputs are immensely damaging – although governments have so far blinded themselves to this, preferring to believe that the demise of bees, for example, is just bad luck. Yet we don’t need bees to tell us how bad things are. There aren’t any flies around either, compared to when I was a lad, and every kitchen had to have a fly-paper. Even the seas don’t escape. Coral reefs are dying from industrial run-off and closer to home it’s very disappointing these days to look in any rock-pool. The creatures that Philip Gosse wrote about so rapturously 150 years ago are more or less all gone. The flowers and toads and starfish and goodness knows what that still abound in books for tiny tots are almost a folk memory. Everyone with half a brain knows that agrochemicals and industrial debris of one kind or another, from organochlorines to oestrogen mimics, are key players in all this. But governments prefer what George Orwell called double-think, and deny what is obvious.

The grand solution is to do what is suggested elsewhere in this website – shift ourselves with all speed into “The Age of Biology”: start thinking of our food supply as an exercise in physiology and ecology, which in the end it must be, and start thinking biologically. The nearest we come to this in agriculture in any concerted way is through the organic movement. The point is not to treat organic farming as another ideology, or to become too hooked on its legalities, but to perceive the spirit of it. For modern organic thinking is an exercise in applied ecology – largely relying on the interplay of different crops and classes of livestock: the whole farm not simply “mixed”, but conceived as an ecosystem. Truly

exciting stuff: intellectually at least as stimulating as the wholesale reading of genomes; and absolutely in tune with what the world needs.

Some farmers and scientists realized all this decades ago – and established the modern organic movement. Over the past half century or so, with little no help from governments or the rest of the powers that be and indeed in the face of derision, they have provided us with some astonishing insights that now are of obvious relevance – controlling pests and weeds by mixed cropping; maintaining fertility without extraneous insights, maintaining soil water without irrigation, and so on. Yet as one leading organic researcher is fond of saying, “We ain’t seen nothing yet!” We need not embrace the organic philosophy wholesale in all its ramifications, or become too dedicated to its rules. I would not want to suggest that organic farming as it stands is the solution to all our problems. But organic farming has, beyond any doubt, laid the foundations for the “Age of Biology”, which agriculture as a whole now needs to move into. If the powers-that-be were serious about the future of humankind and of the world at large, then this is where they would be investing our taxpayer’s money.

Instead, as successive secretaries of state and the last Prime Minister have been keen to emphasise, with noises off from a succession of chief scientific advisers if not so emphatically by the present one, they have put their faith in GM. They see GM as the magic bullet, the genie, like penicillin, or like DDT (as it was perceived in the 1930s), the instant answer to all our prayers. At least equally to the point, they see its enormous commercial potential: an answer to all our prayers that is also lucrative, making fat cats even fatter – my goodness me! Here is benison indeed. At best this is simple minded. It is made to look modern – biotech is jolly *clever*, after all – but in truth it merely extends the thinking of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, reducing agriculture to an exercise in industrial chemistry, albeit this time round with bells and whistles.

Now, a new authoritative journal of world agriculture is being launched, almost exclusively for refereed articles, with an editorial board that bristles with professors and knights of the realm. The introduction mentions organic farming – though not as one of the few bright sparks on an otherwise dismal horizon, truly the harbinger of an Age of Biology, but as an exercise in semantics. It is vital, we are told, to get the definition clear. No it isn’t, as Wittgenstein might have pointed out. Just get on with it.

In truth, the powers-that-be have lost the plot. I am glad I am not one of them – I would far rather be a scribbler, the only trade for idlers. I bear no grudges – some of the people I admire most in this world, and enjoy spending time with, are among the powers-that-be, at least ostensibly. But they need to come off their very high horses, and to consider, as Cromwell once put the matter to the Scottish parliamentarians, that they might be mistaken; and to consider, furthermore, that people at large, including many that they have consistently derided, actually know more than they do, and have got it right; and ask themselves, like monks in a confessional, whether what they are doing is *really* of use to humanity and to the world, or is just a nice living.

Meanwhile, this website, this Campaign, is dedicated to people of whatever calling in life who *are* helping to create ways of growing food worldwide, and getting it out to people, that really do work.

Colin Tudge, Wolvercote, February 4 2010