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THE SCOTSMAN

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FROM THE PROSPECTUS OF THE SCOTSMAN, 30 NOVEMBER 1816

Reasons for GM ban sadly lacking, but it's not too late

LAST week's announcement by the Scottish Government that the growing of genetically modified crops was to be banned was unexpected, because it was not preceded by the kind of public debate that would normally take place over a matter of apparently great national importance.

The announcement by rural affairs secretary Richard Lochhead was unconvincing, citing a lack of demand for GM crops and a threat to the nation's "clean, green status" as reasons for outlawing the technology. Firstly, there are few current GM crops at this stage which would be appropriate in Scotland, so a lack of demand is to be expected, and in terms of a threat to the environment, there was an odd lack of hard evidence presented to back up this claim.

Any nagging doubts were reinforced yesterday with a remarkable attack on the government's GM policy from its

former chief science adviser. Professor Muffy Calder, who stepped down from her advisory role in December and as yet has no successor. She is "disappointed and angry" about the ban and has called on Mr Lochhead to publish the scientific basis for the decision. Significantly, she is unaware of any research being done on a possible public backlash when she was chief scientific adviser.

Opponents point to Professor Calder's lack of expertise on GM crops, but this misses the point. For the Scottish Government to take such a decision, it has a responsibility to give detailed reasons of exactly why it has followed this course of action.

Nor is the professor alone in her demand for justification of the GM decision, with many in the science and agricultural communities asking the same questions. There are fears that cutting off GM technology will leave Scottish farmers at a disad-

vantage against competitors, in terms of yield and particularly in the potato industry where the development of a blight-resistant crop could see other countries clear up when Scottish crops are hit.

It has to be acknowledged that there are environmental concerns over GM crops, even if the effects remain a matter of debate. But what makes the government's decision feel uncomfortable is the turning of our back on science. For a country with an international reputation for being at the forefront of ground-breaking research, the ban appears incongruous. At best, it looks too hasty. It would have been wiser to keep options open until such time as the scientific evidence, for or against, is more compelling, and the public mood has been properly gauged rather than guessed, as seems to have happened.

The decision has been made, but it is not irreversible. In the



meantime, Mr Lochhead would be doing his government, and Scotland, a service if he was to indulge us with a full and convincing explanation for this dubious decision.

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