

# Council of Canadians panel discussion

BY MELANIE WRIGHT

The masses are indifferent and apathetic. No one can really make a difference.

If you believe these pessimistic sentiments then you obviously were not at the Council of Canadians panel discussion "Reclaiming Democracy: Food, Water, and the WTO — Whose Future Is It?"

The panel of influential individuals including: Tony Clarke, Victoria Gibb-Carsley, Jennifer Story, Elizabeth May and Cassin Elliot tackled a variety of issues currently on the global agenda.

Clarke, Vice Chair of the Council of Canadians said, "something far beyond governance is controlling this country...rules are being set elsewhere that the government must follow." Clarke was referring to the World Trade Organization (WTO) and its present power in the international marketplace.

The WTO was established in 1995, at the conclusion of the Uruguay Round of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). The official web site of the World Trade Organization states that their purpose is to ensure trade between nations flows smoothly, predictably, and as freely as possible.

However, Clark argues that the WTO is not just about eliminating trade barriers and tariffs. The institution represents a new world government that holds tremendous

judicial and legislative powers. Such powers include the ability to challenge the laws, policies and programs of countries that do not conform to WTO rules. What emerges from this is "a world governing body for and by transnational corporations," according to Clarke. There is no direct connection made to everyday people affected by the actions of corporations.

However, the WTO claims to be involved more democratically. If there is a dispute between countries, the WTO can directly influence government policy. The Dispute Settlement Body, consisting of all members, decides if a country has broken a rule and in some cases forces them to conform.

Recall December 1999, the WTO met in Seattle to discuss negotiations among its 134 member countries. Cassin Elliot, member of the Youth for Environmental Action Network was actually there. He claims the activists who stood their ground in Seattle, were partaking in peaceful protesting for direct action.

Unfortunately, there were some vandals and unruly people causing problems. Yet, the police perpetuated the 'riots.' Pepper spray, tear gas and rubber bullets were used by the police "in their riot to control the protestors" said Elliot.

The Council of Canadians is an independent, nonprofit, nonpartisan organization. They do not take money from corporations or government, as they believe that would

compromise their goals.

Jennifer Story, the Council's Health Protection campaigner, has successfully fought against genetically engineered food. She began her discussion by asking the audience "is economic profit killing the planet?"

Though not everyone has necessarily heard about Genetically Engineered (GE) foods, Canadians have been involuntarily taking part in a food experiment driven by the GE food industry.

Genetic engineering involves joining together the DNA from organisms that would never naturally breed. Genes from one organism (possibly a fish) are spliced and injected into the cell of a host organism (possibly a tomato). Yet, Story claims that the technology is unstable, and those promoting it may be operating under outdated assumptions about how genes work. The result is the creation of "foods" that may be pest-resistant, or pesticide-resistant. It is a worry that if these crops become ubiquitous, and if they spread into wild populations,

we could face crops failures and environmental devastation.

The European Union (EU) is a good example for the possibility of keeping GE foods out of Canadian grocery stores. The EU wants GE foods labelled and refuses to import any GE crops. However, Canada and the United States are big promoters of the trade in genetically engineered products. The Canadian government, apparently siding along with Monsanto — the maker of GE seeds, pesticides, and Bovine Growth Hormone — has not supported the labelling of GE foods, or consumer bans to hinder GE trade.

Story claims that as much as 70 percent of prepackaged goods "may contain" GE food. In Canada, 57 percent of the canola, 45 percent of the corn and 25 percent of the soya produced are genetically engineered. The consumption of these products can be considered an experiment on Canadians because there has been testing of its long-term effects on human health. Another major issue is that no one

knows what may happen if GE crops cross-pollinate with other plants. There has not been a serious addressing of how GE organisms may damage our health, and the health of the environment.

Furthermore, several global corporations, Monsanto, Dow, and DuPont dominate the GE food industry. They promise the possibility of solving world hunger as a justification for GE technology. Yet some suggest that the problem of world hunger has little to do with the gross amount of food produced, but rather can be contributed to its unequal distribution world wide — a problem which may be exacerbated by the corporate control of the world's food supply.

Jennifer Story put it best when she emphatically stated "we aren't convinced that your science is sound. We need evidence of safety before we can accept it versus evidence that it is harmful before we can say no."

As Jennifer Story said: "Think global act local."



## DID YOU KNOW?

The temperature on earth is regulated by a system called the greenhouse effect. This natural phenomenon is caused by water vapour and other gases in the atmosphere. As energy is used it adds to the gas in the atmosphere, increasing earth's temperature. An estimated 60 to 65 percent of greenhouse gas emissions are energy by-products, which can cause shifts in rainfall and weather patterns, increases in sea level, create risks to wildlife and humans, and alter growing seasons.

Here's what you can do to decrease your energy use:

- Use natural light as the primary source whenever possible
- Turn off your lights when they are not needed
- Seal off or separate unused or storage areas to keep in the heat
- Turn off your computer when not in use — screen savers on computers are used to avoid screen burn; they are not energy savers. In fact, some consume even more energy.
- Use cold water instead of hot whenever possible
- Maintain your car to ensure fuel-efficiency and low pollution emissions
- Accelerate and decelerate smoothly — speeding can use up to 25 percent more fuel than driving at the speed limit
- Car pool, take the bus, bike or walk to school



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