

The return of mad cows?

REMEMBER MADGE?

They were the trendy, bored Remuera housewife types, parading as Mothers Against Genetic Engineering, led by former 1980s pop star Alannah Currie.

They were – unsurprisingly – against genetic engineering.

MADGE was more famous for its soft-porn poster of a four-breasted woman, and its members taking off their tops in Parliament's public gallery, rather than anything it actually achieved. The group appeared suddenly about 2002 then disappeared just as quickly a



year or so later.

MADGE's claim to fame – apart from the stunts mentioned above – was insinuating that genetic engineering posed the greatest threat to mankind since... the last greatest threat to mankind.

Inspired by conspiracy

theories and pseudo-science, Currie and her cohorts blamed GE for everything from cross-pollinated 'Frankenfood' to mad cow disease.

On reflection, MADGE was the precursor to similar groups who now, a decade later, are protesting about

today's greatest threat to mankind – climate change. Ironically, these climate change warriors (worriers) are also led by passed-their-used-by-date female 'artists' – namely actresses Lucy Lawless and Robyn Malcolm.

Thankfully, Currie got bored with lecturing New Zealanders about the evils of GE and returned to the UK to reinvent herself as an artist-upholsterer. However, like one of her awful 1980s Thomson Twins tunes, her anti-GE conspiracy

or eight years has not detected any measurable transfer of genetic material.

Meanwhile, its research manager Jimmy Suttie says the CRI was entitled to refute the report's claims and that its monitoring methods at Ruakura were sound.

Suttie also denied the report damaged AgResearch's reputation, saying he did not think the public understood the debate.

But that is exactly the problem Suttie – the

“The public do not understand complex issues like GE and climate change.”

theories could be on the comeback following media reports revealing a potential cover-up of research about genetic engineering.

A recent report critical of AgResearch practices at its genetic engineering laboratories sparked a war of words between the Canterbury University professor who wrote it and AgResearch.

Professor Jack Heinemann, from Canterbury's Centre for Integrated Research in Biosafety, was asked by GE Free New Zealand to look into AgResearch's monitoring of the risk of horizontal gene transfers at its Ruakura facility.

The report looked at the agency's offal holes containing genetically engineered cow carcasses and its monitoring of the risk of material from those pits contaminating the soil.

Heinemann found what he described as “fundamental flaws” in the monitoring of horizontal gene transfer from genetically modified animals disposed of in offal pits.

He claimed AgResearch was monitoring soil that was irrelevant because it was at the top of the offal pits and not metres below, where the animals were buried. Heinemann's report said whenever signals were detected that the risk of a transfer existed, they were not rigorously pursued.

However, AgResearch argued its monitoring programme was in line with “best practice science” and in seven

public do not understand complex issues like GE and climate change. And this makes it easy for groups like MADGE – and the global warming screamers – to sow seeds of doubt and talk of conspiracy theories.

The focus on the “worst case scenario” – especially by uninformed amateurs like Currie, Malcolm and Lawless – does more damage to causes such as the anti-GE and Climate Change PR campaigns than anything else.

Meantime, the lobby against climate change probably has an even louder voice in this country, which probably explains poll results showing a greater percentage of the population does not believe in climate change.

But just because the climate sceptics are louder doesn't necessarily mean their arguments are more accurate.

For most people, complex topics such as GE and climate change create too much confusion. The public don't want to get caught up in hype – they just want the facts.

Therefore it is important that organisations like AgResearch and other scientific bodies are fully open and honest about, and with, their research.

This will allow the facts to emerge and means broken-down pop singers and actresses can stick to their day jobs.

• *David Anderson is a former Rural News editor and an agribusiness commentator.*



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