



# Saskatchewan



# Notes

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## Who is Behind Biotechnology Policy in Canada?

— by *Brewster Kneen and Devlin Kuyek*

**A** New Zealand organic farmer once asked why his government seemed bent on introducing GE crops when it was clear that the vast majority of New Zealanders want nothing to do with them. A similar question was on our minds when we set out to find out how Canada had ended up with a biotech policy that is so at odds with citizens' priorities. This research reveals the depth of government support of the biotech industry and names nearly two hundred key actors in the behind-the-scenes drama.

Since 1980 successive governments in Canada have given unwavering support to the biotech industry. The record reveals that biotechnology policy has been the private domain of a small number of corporate executives, the offices of the Prime Minister and the Privy Council, a selection of senior government bureaucrats, university presidents and board members of governmental/industry promotion and granting agencies. The persons occupying any one of these positions may reappear in any number of other roles within the same play, either simultaneously or at different times. These are the people who make up the "real board of directors" of the biotech industry in Canada.

Under Brian Mulroney two key developments brought biotech to the centre of federal policy and shifted the emphasis of Canadian policy towards foreign investment:

- The abandonment of federal support for the generic drug industry in favour of the multinational pharmaceutical industry, and
- The negotiation of two free-trade agreements with the USA.

The new federal agenda was to deregulate industry, enforce intellectual property rights (patents), and subsidize high-technology research and development to attract foreign investment.

In addition, the bureaucracies' accepted wisdom was that advancement and economic growth were linked in a direct cause and effect relationship. Within this context, Canada's biotech industry became a key sector for the federal government embedded deeply into Ottawa's corridors of power, while Parliament was essentially excluded from policy-making.

Under Chrétien, the government's commitment to the biotech industry deepened considerably. Liberal biotechnology policy is shaped by transnational corporations, particularly the pharmaceuticals companies, and an effective domestic lobby of scientist/entrepreneurs, usually tied to corporations through various contracts. These individuals turn up time and again on different governmental advisory bodies.

One of the most influential voices in the development of Canadian biotechnology policy is John Evans. Evans, President Emeritus of the University of Toronto, was the CEO of Allelix, Canada's pioneer agricultural and biopharmaceutical biotech company, in the 1980s. During that time he also served as Chairman of the National Biotechnology Advisory Committee, the forerunner of the Canadian Biotechnology Advisory Committee. Evans is connected in all sectors of the network that sustains the biotech industry in Canada. On the public sector side, he is Chairman of the \$2.4 billion Canadian Foundation for Innovation, a principal source of federal funding for biotech research at Canadian Universities and he sits on Alberta's Premier's Advisory Council on Health, a key vehicle in the promotion of two-tier health care. On the private sector side, he is a director of several leading biopharma companies, including Allelix, GlycoDesign, and Connaught, some of the major sources for venture capital, such as MDS and the Royal Bank, and one of Canada's most important news agencies, as Chairman of the Board of Torstar. Evans's latest biotech project is Toronto's Medi-

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cal and Related Sciences (MaRS) Discovery District, a proposed research-business complex that brings together pharmaceutical corporations, hospital and university researchers and spin-off companies to develop and commercialise research, with generous support from all levels of government.

Another player on the Canadian biotech scene is Lorne Babiuk, Director of Saskatchewan's Veterinary Infectious Disease Organisation. Like many of the actors in biotech policy, he plays a number of different roles. He's a biotech entrepreneur who, through publicly-supported research, has churned out patents, a spin-off company, and contracts with major corporations. He's an advisor for the people, as one of the "experts" that sit on the Canadian Biotechnology Advisory Committee and, more often, an advisor to corporations, acting as a consultant or director for several biotech companies. And, he has a hand on the biotech purse strings, as a member of the board of the federal government's Canadian Foundation for Innovation, Genome Prairie and Genome Canada and as Scientific Advisor for Foragen, the Royal Bank/Saskatchewan government biotech venture fund.

The scientist/entrepreneurs are joined by big players in the financial sector, particularly those engaged in venture capital, that are connected to government circles and heavily invested in biotechnology. There is also a culture and a form of organization within the federal bureaucracy that lends itself very well to the biotech industry's interests -- bureaucrats refer to industry as the "client" or the "partner" of government.

Saskatchewan also plays a major role in supporting and implementing the national biotech policy. Saskatoon is one of the federal government's strategic centres of biotech research. The Plant Biotechnology Institute in Saskatoon has had a national mandate for research in agbiotech research since 1983. The Province established Innovation Place on the U of S campus in 1980, and has invested well over \$700 million attracting agbiotech companies to Saskatoon.

Former Agriculture Minister and Saskatchewan MP Ralph Goodale has played a major role in securing millions

in federal subsidies for the biotech industry in the province. AgWest Biotech, heavily funded by the Province to promote the biotech sector within Saskatchewan and abroad, is a member of the industry lobby group BIO-TECanada, which in turn is generously funded by Industry Canada.

All these actors form a web of relations between industry and government that directs policy, while the federal government buries the lack of democracy in a pile of rhetoric. "Transparency" is the current vogue in governmental policy. But to the government and industry, transparency only means that the public should be able to see how and on what grounds a decision is made, while the public actually remains powerless on the outside looking in. There is no democracy inherent in transparency.

The Chrétien government has a strong interest in keeping its biotech policy outside of public scrutiny. Biotechnology creates space for the federal government to justify privatisation, deregulation, and the concentration of wealth in the name of innovation. In this sense, biotechnology not only destroys the integrity of living organisms; it also shatters the integrity of our societies.

It is our belief that this connection between biotechnology and neo-liberalism should be the focus of opposition to biotechnology. When federal or provincial governments announce their commitment to biotechnology they are not just supporting a technology with potential environmental and health risks, they are also taking specific positions that have deep ramifications for our society. The opposition to corporate-led biotech needs to expose these deeper consequences.

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