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Greenpeace's action was vandalism and inhibited the need for scientific research

Defence counsel for the Greenpeace vandals reassured the court that his clients were 'the sort of people you may expect to find sitting on a jury'. He was right, of course, with a vengeance. But far from being a character reference for the defendants, it is an indictment of the jury system. I am not in the least surprised to read that after the trial members of the jury were seen 'congratulating defendants'.

What sort of signal has been sent out by this verdict? Is it, as some have said, a charter for burglars, arsonists and telephone box vandals? Can we now freely commit crimes on the assumption that a jury of Big Brother -watching Sun -readers will reach a verdict uncontaminated by the facts of the case? It hasn't quite come to that. But it is close. This, emphatically, is not to be compared with the sort of civil disobedience that can be justified on genuinely thoughtful grounds.

Lord Melchett is no Gandhi, no Mandela, taking direct action as the only possible recourse against an oppressive regime. On the other hand, he and his friends are probably not as sinister as their 'decontamination suit' uniforms suggest. On balance, Lord Melchett is more airheaded wally than Mosleyite stormtrooper.

The air force general in Dr Strangelove who took devastating direct action in defence of 'our precious bodily fluids', is fiction... just. Popular misconceptions about GM foods are well up in the 'precious bodily fluids' class. If you pick 12 people at random, the majority might well think that GM is a substance, like DDT. Or that if they are 'contaminated' by GM they will undergo some Frankensteinian transmogrification. Or they wouldn't understand what is funny about the protesters' slogan: 'We don't want DNA in our tomatoes.' Aren't there some beliefs too daft for 'sincerity' to be an excuse?

Many of us believe the News of the World is an affront to decent humanity. Are we now free to torch its editorial offices? Many people sincerely think abortion is legalised murder. Will the Greenpeace verdict signal open season on doctors and clinics, as happens in some parts of America?

Some people sincerely believe that their private opinions on petrol prices entitle them to take unilateral action and blockade the country's vital supplies. Presumably, Greenpeace would oppose them, since high petrol taxes help to reduce pollution. We don't have to project our imaginations far into the future to envision Greenpeace warriors storming the barricades of fuel-protesting lorry drivers. If there are casualties and damage, should the jury acquit both sides, on the grounds that both sincerely believed their (opposite and incompatible) doctrines?

Is this really the sort of country we want to live in? Is this how we want to decide policy? That is where the Greenpeace verdict seems to be leading us.

The Government may be ruefully wondering whether it has been hoist by its own petard. Was it wise to encourage those outbursts of mindless 'feeling' and all that hysterical caterwauling over the 'People's Princess'? Has feeling become the new thinking? If so, the Government may bear some indirect responsibility.

The late Carl Sagan was once asked a question to which he didn't know the answer and he firmly said so. The questioner persisted: 'But what is your gut feeling?' Sagan's reply is never to be forgotten: 'But I try not to think with my gut. If I'm serious about understanding the world, thinking with anything besides my brain, as tempting as that might be, is likely to get me into trouble. It's OK to reserve judgment until the evidence is in.'

I genuinely don't know what to think about genetically modified crops, and nor should anyone else. The evidence is not yet in. Particular kinds of genetic modification may be a very bad idea. Or they may be a very good idea. It is precisely because we don't know that we have to find out. That is the

purpose of experimental trials such as the one sabotaged by Greenpeace. Scientists do not know all the answers and should not claim to. Science is not a testament of doctrines; rather, it is a method of finding out. It is the only method that works by definition, since if a better method comes along, science will incorporate it. If we are not allowed to do experimental trials on genetically modified crops, we shall never know the bad things or the good things about them.

We now know that strong doses of X-rays are very dangerous. They can induce mutations and cause cancers. But if used carefully and in moderation, X-rays are a priceless diagnostic tool. We can all be thankful that predecessor of Greenpeace did not sabotage Roentgen's experiments on X-rays or Muller's investigations of mutagenesis.

We depend on scientific research to predict both the good and bad consequences of innovation. It is a reasonable guess (not a gut feeling) that genetically modified crops will also turn out to have both bad and good aspects. Certainly, it will be possible to modify plants to our benefit. And certainly it would be possible to modify plants in deliberately malevolent directions.

Very likely, as in the case of X-rays, even the good modifications may turn out to have some bad side-effects. It would be better to discover these now, in carefully controlled trials, rather than let them emerge later. With hindsight, it is a pity more research was not done earlier on the dangers of X-rays. If it had been, children of my generation would not have been allowed to play with X-ray machines in shoe shops.

We need more research, not less. And if we are to have activists protesting about dangerous crops, let us draw their zealous attention to those crops whose evil effects are already known because the necessary research was allowed to be done. Like tobacco.