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Does the Consumer Association of Canada speak for Canadians ?

GUESTS:

BRADFORD DUPLISEA, Researcher, Canadian Health Coalition
JENNY HILLARD, Vice-President, Consumers Association of Canada
JULIEN EDWARDS, Director General, Consumers International
BART BILMER, Canadian Food Inspection Agency
BRUCE CRAN, Consumers Association of Canada, BC Chapter President

JACQUIE PERRIN: What would you say if you discovered that a national association which says it speaks on your behalf doesn't? That's what our next story is about. It's a fight involving food, and the Consumers' Association of Canada. Here's Jim Nunn.

JIM NUNN (Reporter): This food fight is about something small, labels like this one, found on a bag of potatoes in a grocery store in London, England. And this one, and this. In many countries like England, it's the law that grocery store foods be labelled as to whether or not they contain genetically modified ingredients. But in Canada there's no such law. When you go grocery shopping, you don't know whether you are filling your cart with genetically modified foods. So chances are you've eaten them, and that makes some people angry.

BRADFORD DUPLISEA (Researcher, Canadian Health Coalition): Consumers do have the right to know, and they have the right to choose what they eat.

NUNN: Bradford Duplisea avoids genetically modified foods by eating organic when possible. He's a researcher for the Canadian Health Coalition, a group which works to save medicare.

DUPLISEA: Over the last five years, survey after survey, including government and industry surveys, have steadily shown that over ninety percent of Canadians want to know if the food that they eat has been genetically modified.

NUNN: But mandatory labelling isn't supported by the Consumers' Association of Canada, the CAC, the leading national consumer group.

JENNY HILLARD (Vice-President, Consumers Association of Canada): There is an awful lot of people in the marketing chain.

NUNN: For twenty-five years Jenny Hillard, Vice-President of the CAC, has been a voice of Canadian consumers to government and industry. But the CAC's position on labelling genetically modified food leaves a sour taste in the mouths of its critics.

HILLARD: It does sound so wonderfully simple, oh let's label everything. But most people believe that genetically modified products are in the fruit and vegetable aisle, and they're not. They're not single-ingredient products.

NUNN: No, it's not simple, but I expect you're aware that 95 per cent of Canadians have been polled as being in favour of mandatory labelling.

HILLARD: Yeah, and we don't support, at this point we don't support mandatory because we don't think it's going to be done accurately because that's what we've seen in other countries so we're working on the voluntary standard.

NUNN: But in England, Consumers International says mandatory labelling is working there just fine. Consumers International is a collective of consumer groups from around the world, including the CAC. Julian Edwards is its Director General.

JULIEN EDWARDS (Director General, Consumers International): We believe that there should be mandatory, comprehensive labelling for any product that contains or is derived from genetically modified material.

NUNN: Here in Canada, it's not quite so simple. The Consumers' Association of Canada takes the same position as the federal government and the food biotech industry. They all favour voluntary labelling, basically an honour system for the food companies to disclose whether or not their products contain genetically modified ingredients. But you'd think if the majority of Canadians favour mandatory labelling, the Consumers' Association of Canada would too. It's led some to wonder whether Canada's leading consumer group really represents what Canadians want on this issue. Bradford Duplisea says the CAC does not.

DUPLISEA: None of the genetically modified foods on supermarket shelves have ever undergone long-term testing. So nobody knows whether they're safe or not. To advocate eating unlabelled and untested foods, to me, is an unimaginable position for a group that purports to represent consumers.

NUNN: The controversy begins here, in fields like these, where genetically modified corn may be growing. Genetically modified crops can be highly profitable for companies who use the process to make crops grow faster or resist weeds. This animation illustrates how genetic modification works. A new gene is inserted into a plant's DNA. The federal government supports biotechnology, and the food industry has promoted it with the support of the Consumers' Association of Canada. Right now, the CAC admits genetically modified foods offer few benefits to the consumer. But the CAC's Vice-President says we may expect some in the near future.

HILLARD: Just recently they announced in the UK that they thought they could genetically modify, I believe it was corn, but it was one of the crops, so that your cereals don't go soggy when you pour the milk on them. I think that's one thing that a lot of consumers looking for. A lot of consumers go and look for a cereal that doesn't mop up the milk and go soggy.

NUNN: I must ask you, though, are you serious when you say that corn flakes which don't go soggy are the benefit of biotechnology that we can look forward to?

HILLARD: No, no, this is just the one that came out last week that was sort of touted as being a benefit. Certainly some of the groups in the UK said this was the most ridiculous thing they had ever heard. But certainly the corn flake companies, the cereal companies, have been working for a long time using wax and things to try and stop your cereals going soggy. So if they could do that through the grain, you know, unless you like eating wax, you know, maybe there's an application here.

NUNN: Cornflakes. Salad dressings. Cake mixes. All foods that may or may not contain genetically modified ingredients. But is your opinion of such foods getting through to the Canadian government? The government has consulted the Consumers' Association of Canada about what you think. In fact, they've paid the CAC for its research. For example, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, which is responsible for the safety of our food, paid CAC \$70,000.00 to advise it on consumer reaction to genetically modified food.

BART BILMER (Canadian Food Inspection Agency): I think, like many other organizations, that we've invited to consultations and meetings, the Consumers' Association has provided us with a perspective on what their constituency was saying on biotechnology.

DUPLISEA: I can show you where I do my Access to Information Requests.

NUNN: Duplisea has collected stacks of government documents that show how the CAC has partnered with government and industry. This booklet, "A Growing Appetite for Information", distributed in Canadian Living Magazine, is an example. It sparked a lot of criticism.

DUPLISEA: When I read this booklet, I thought I was reading government and biotech industry propaganda, because it parroted their message on every issue from labelling to regulation.

NUNN: The booklet was developed by the Consumers' Association of Canada and the Food Biotechnology Communications Network, which is largely funded by big food biotechnology companies like Ag-West Biotech, Monsanto, and Aventis.

DUPLISEA: I think it's unbelievable. The Food Biotech Communications Network is the front group for the biotech industry in Canada. They have received hundreds of thousands of dollars from the biotech industry to promote GM food. For a consumers' association to become involved with them, to me, is unimaginable.

NUNN: Why would the Consumers' Association of Canada choose to ally itself with an industry organization?

HILLARD: Because we didn't see it as that. We saw it as a group of different stakeholders trying to get accurate information out to consumers. We did not see it as allying ourselves with an industry group.

NUNN: The booklet has even stirred up controversy within the CAC. Bruce Cran is President of the CAC's British Columbia chapter.

BRUCE CRAN (Consumers Association of Canada, British Columbia Chapter President): It was more like a booklet in favour of genetically engineered food, which we thought was inappropriate, and that's why we didn't participate in the distribution or support the pamphlet.

NUNN: And on the issue of labelling, there is a serious rift within the CAC family.

CRAN: Our position on labelling is that we stand for mandatory labelling of genetically engineered food.

NUNN: The CAC's national position conflicts with that of Consumers International. Julian Edwards says the CAC stands out.

EDWARDS: I know of no other consumer groups that have publicly lobbied for voluntary as opposed to mandatory labelling of genetically modified foods.

NUNN: Is it simply a coincidence that the perspective of the Consumers' Association of Canada and the approach of government and industry seems to meld so nicely?

HILLARD: I don't think you'd find it would. I think if you talk industry people that I sit around the committee tables with, I think that you'd find we're a very long way away on a lot of issues.

DUPLISEA: When you're so entwined financially, operationally, and ideologically, you've lost the ability to provide that independent oversight that's essential to consumer watchdog groups. Instead of being a consumer watchdog, the Consumers' Association has become a lapdog for the government and biotech industry, and that's unacceptable.

NUNN: And within the CAC, the food fight rages. Bruce Cran of the BC chapter is still trying to convince the CAC's national office to support mandatory labelling.

CRAN: We want to know what's in the can, we want to know what the food is that we're buying. If it's corn, we want to know if it's genetically engineered. That gives a consumer sufficient information to make a choice.

NUNN: So unless consumer opinion manages to sway the government to order mandatory labelling, the next time you go shopping you still won't know exactly what you're putting in your grocery cart.