Protest and 'democracy'

To the Editor:

A letter in your September issue by Henry Miller[1] likens the decision of German universities to reject full-scale tests of genetically modified (GM) plants in the face of widespread public skepticism to the oppression of art under Hitler. This is an insult to an entire country.

Miller seems to have overlooked the fact that the decisions by these universities followed quite democratic principles. Any protest, be that in the extreme form of the destruction of test fields, is an integral part of democracy and has to be engaged with. The scientific community has a duty to persuade the general public that its research is indeed necessary and vital. If scientists fail in this, as seems to be the case with GM crops in several countries, then the public has every right to oppose the work, irrespective of whether it funds the work through taxes or not. Perhaps this approach sounded too arduous to Miller but as he pointed out, there is a simple solution to this: eliminate such irritating squabbles and lock away any opposition with that great tool of modern democracy—antiterrorism laws. Now, which version would have been more to the liking of Mr. Hitler?

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1. Miller, H.I. *Nat. Biotechnol.* **26**, 974–975 (2008).

Henry Miller replies:

Laws in democratic nations and university communities do not exist primarily to protect the majorities, who can take care of themselves. Rather, they exist to protect those whose numbers are small and whose views or actions are unpopular, and who, therefore, are potential victims of discrimination and violence.

On the evidence of his letter, Laufer appears to have a different view of democratic government, the rule of law and academic freedom. He dismisses "the destruction of field trials" as merely "an integral part of democracy" that "has to be engaged with." One can easily extend this line of thought further: suppose a few chums and I were to decide that we don't like the research performed by Laufer, and we wished to extend democratic principles to the destruction of his laboratory and research records? Would that be all right?

Laufer's assertion that universities' bans on field trials of recombinant DNA–modified plants "followed quite democratic principles" is puzzling. Are the university bureaucrats who imposed such bans publicly elected officials? Did the faculties and student bodies vote to ban field trials? And even if they had, would such decisions be legitimate at a university, or would they violate the principles of academic freedom by representing the tyranny of the majority?

Finally, Laufer's assertion that the scientific community "has a duty to persuade the general public that its research is indeed necessary and vital" is misguided. As long as a scientist (or a nonscientist, for that matter) can secure funding for an experiment that does not pose a likely hazard or violate a law, the experimenter bears no responsibility of any kind to convince anyone of anything. That is the nature of free people in democratic societies.

Foot and Mouth's Achilles' heel?

To the Editor:

In your issue last December, an editorial highlighted the economic damage and draconian culls that result from outbreaks of Foot and Mouth disease virus (FMDV), as well as the difficulties associated with vaccinating animals against the virus[1]. Models of the spread of FMDV[2] underscore the weakness of contingency or 'ring' vaccination as a disease control measure: the delay in seroconversion (~7 days). Although the commercial case for a program of drug development *de novo* is weak, the wider economic case for public/governmental commissioned funding is strong.

Last year's FMDV escape in the UK mentioned in the editorial highlights the need for further exploration of antiviral compound strategies based on a required feature of viral decoding that is not used by host cells. Most of the proteins encoded by FMDV are derived from proteolytic cleavage of a polyprotein. There is strong evidence, however, that generating the C terminus of one of its proteins (2A), and the N terminus of the protein immediately downstream (2B), does not involve a protease but cleavage of the ester linkage of peptidyl-tRNA within the peptidyl-transferase center of the ribosome with continuing translation[3–5]—a phenomenon termed 'StopGo'[5].