

# REACH is not about safety

## It's a futile attempt to reassure, argues Bill Durodie

**The European Union plan to test chemicals, known as REACH, emerged after various other initiatives had already improved safety and ensured scrutiny.**

In an age of spin, when risk regulation has become *de rigeur* across many activities, we should be alert to this being a policy development driven more by the need to be seen to be taking action, than by any need or benefit.

Others have pointed to the difficulty, cost and lack of necessity to evaluate tens of thousands of chemicals that have been in use for over 20 years and for which we have billions of hours of exposure data. Whatever battery of toxicity and carcinogenicity tests the chemicals will be subjected to can never be comprehensive and will never satisfy those who have expressed concern.

### **Dislocation, not science**

The real driver behind insecurities today lies more in political and social context than in scientific content. We live in an age of political disengagement, as well as social disconnection. As people no longer participate politically, or

form social networks as they once did, so science appears to dominate their lives. Trust and tolerance in authority, whether scientific, corporate or political, has also waned.

Increasingly, subjective impressions of reality go unmoderated, or unmediated, through membership of some trusted group or community. They have grown into world views, not open to reasoned interrogation, but resting on isolated egos. This process has been encouraged by an elite who, lacking any vision of their own, readily repackage themselves as societal risk managers.

Sensing their growing isolation from those they depend upon for authority, leaders now offer to protect us from our fears. Accordingly, the specific issues form only a small part of what shapes these debates. They are driven more by a sense of alienation from the decision process than by real risks. Many concerns can be described as conclusions in search of data, but assuming the worst drives policy.

### **Precaution damages**

A proclivity to speculate dominates examination of what actually is in all areas, from chemicals

to vaccines to international terrorism. A preventative paradigm determines outlooks across the political spectrum. This is variously labelled as precaution or pre-emption. It demands extrapolation from uncorroborated or anecdotal evidence, and worst-case scenarios.

Far from stabilising matters and reassuring people, such actions drive concerns and shape a more unstable environment. Rather than challenging the public with evidence, and explaining how social isolation shapes insecurity, leading to regulatory demands, our leaders, lacking direction of their own, pander to social fears by appearing to provide protection.

This obsession with precaution alarms people, diverts social resources and distracts us from real risks. It is the constant demand for reassurance that is the most damaging.

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