

Polluters Must Deny Climate Change or Compensate Victims

by David Collyer

Prime Minister Tony Abbott and his government do not believe in climate change. They are working as fast as the allegedly recalcitrant Senate will allow to erase all the measures Rudd and Gillard introduced to shift Australia to a low-carbon future.

If they merely doubted climate change, they would simply zero-price the behavior-changing settings and await more information. This is usually what cautious, evidence-based conservatives do. But no, their instincts trump the science and they are acting boldly to turn those beliefs into law.

Does ignoring science seem as bizarre to you as it does to me?

When anti-abortionists talk of beliefs, they refer to the biblical injunction “thou shalt not kill” and, agree or not, there is a certain logic and coherence to their views. Yet underlying values seem absent from climate change denier rhetoric, or at best remains unexplained.

Matt Bruenig and George Monbiot might have the answer.

The Abbott government is populated with libertarians, sporting its new face: a procedural justice account of the world based heavily on property rights.

Monbiot:

“Their property rights are absolute and cannot be intruded upon by the state or by anyone else. Any interference with or damage to the value of their property without their consent – even by taxation – is an unwarranted infringement.”

“It is a pitiless, one-sided, mechanical view of the world, which elevates the rights of property over everything else, meaning that those who possess the most property end up with great power over others. Dressed up as freedom, it is a formula for oppression and bondage. It does nothing to address inequality, hardship or social exclusion. A transparently self-serving vision, it seeks to justify the greedy and selfish behaviour of those with wealth and power. But for the sake of argument, Bruenig says, let us accept it.”

“Let us accept the idea that damage to the value of property without the owner’s consent is an unwarranted intrusion upon the owner’s freedoms. What this means is that as soon as libertarians encounter environmental issues, they’re stuffed.”

“Climate change, industrial pollution, ozone depletion, damage to the physical beauty of the area surrounding people’s homes (and therefore their value), all these, if the libertarians did not possess a shocking set of double standards, would be denounced by them as infringements on other people’s property.”

“The owners of coal-burning power stations in the UK have not obtained the consent of everyone who owns a lake or a forest in Sweden to deposit acid rain there. So their emissions, in the libertarian worldview, should be regarded as a form of trespass on the property of Swedish landowners. Nor have they received the consent of the people of this country to allow mercury and other heavy metals to enter our bloodstreams, which means that they are intruding upon our property in the form of our bodies.”

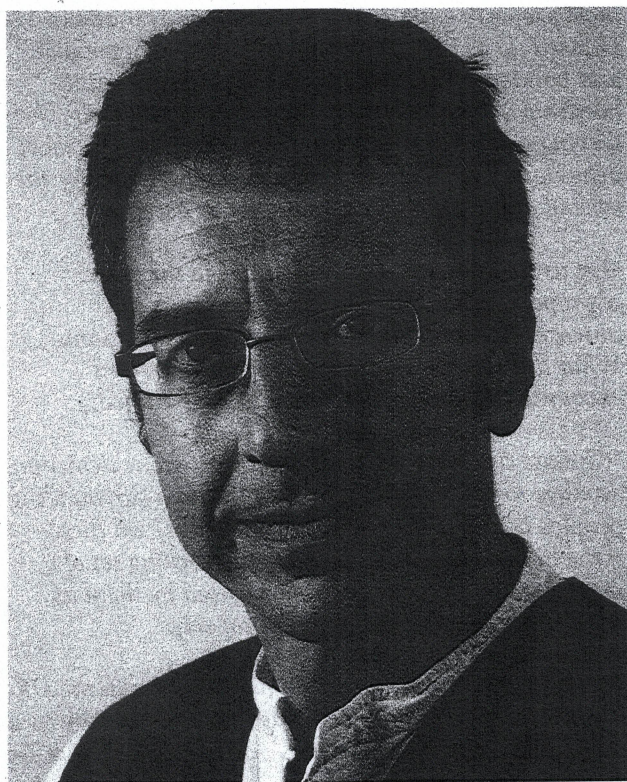
Bruenig:

“Almost all uses of land will entail some infringement on some other piece of land that is owned by someone”

else. So how can that ever be permitted? No story about freedom and property rights can ever justify the pollution of the air or the burning of fuels because those things affect the freedom and property rights of others. Those actions ultimately cause damage to surrounding property and people without getting any consent from those affected. They are the ethical equivalent – for honest libertarians – of punching someone in the face or breaking someone else’s window.”

Monbiot:

“So here we have a simple and coherent explanation of why libertarianism is so often associated with climate change denial and the playing down or dismissal of other environmental issues. It would be impossible for the owner of a power station, steel plant, quarry, farm or any large enterprise to obtain consent for all the trespasses he commits against other people’s property – including their bodies.



George Monbiot

“This is the point at which libertarianism smacks into the wall of gritty reality and crumples like a Coke can. Any honest and thorough application of this philosophy would run counter to its aim: which is to

allow the owners of capital to expand their interests without taxation, regulation or recognition of the rights of other people. Libertarianism becomes self-defeating as soon as it recognises the existence of environmental issues. So they must be denied.

The strident polemics have prevented any meaningful shifting of the burden of taxation from labour to pollution via Pigouvian taxes.

As the US economists EK Hunt, Robin Hahnel and Michael Albert have argued for decades, not only do capitalist markets provide no incentive to correct external effects, it provides every incentive to maximise their impost onto others if this increases profit.

Libertarians and conservatives denounce Pigouvian taxation because it would seriously decrease profits for those doing the cost externalisation e.g. the wealthy and big business. Because uncorrected external effects are so rampant and thus a sign of the grave inefficiencies of capitalism, they have to be denied to even exist.

And if the victims of negative externalities claim a proprietary right to compensation, so might the perpetrators of positive externalities - land value capture and all that.

Moreover, excluding others from a parcel of land can be characterized as a negative externality, and the rental value of the land as the measure of the compensation payable, in which case Georgism is but a species of Pigouvianism. Therefore the existence of externalities must be denied.

Climate-change denialism is but a species of externality denialism.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pigouvian_tax

<http://blog.lvrg.org.au/2013/09/ramsey-and-pigou-crypto-georgists.html>

<http://www.monbiot.com/2012/01/06/why-libertarians-must-deny-climate-change/>

<http://mattbruenig.com/2011/12/21/environmentalism-poses-a-problem-for-libertarian-ideology/>