
The New Power Cartels

ONE OF THE buzz words among social activists concerned with the environment is sustainability.

Unfortunately none of the models currently under offer provide the central mechanism for ensuring a rational use of our natural environment in perpetuity.

Several major themes need to be brought into the reckoning when seeking to visualise a relationship with nature based on respect. One of these is property rights. Another is the nature of our relationship with other people in the community.

But it would be impossible for the most powerful government to define laws and regulations of such complexity as would deliver something approximating the sustainable society. The Soviet Union remains a warning to the planners who think that legislative action is what we require to deliver an enlightened system.

People can be trusted to modify their behaviour if the framework of rules liberates them to act on the basis of justice. But that concept itself is a controversial one, despite the frequency of its use in constitutions and declarations of human rights.

ACCORDING TO the political Right, all we need is for governments to: *Get off our backs.*

This stricture is juvenile. It fails to differentiate complex concepts.

There is a fundamental difference between the resources of nature, and man-made equipment such as factory buildings and lathes. And yet, analysts lump these together under the concept of capital.

There is a fundamental difference between income generated by charges on the rent of land and natural resources, and taxes on people's wages and savings. And yet, again, the analysts fail to note these qualitative differences when they review problems and prescribe solutions.

The crude forms of analysis are to be observed in much of the literature on ecology. As a result, much of the energy that goes into demanding changes in the use of nature is misdirected.

PRINCIPLED REFORMS designed to halt the abuse of nature cannot be successful without a parallel change in social practices that permit the abuse of people.

Social reform is integral to any project intended to conserve the depleteable resources of nature and clean up the environment.

But well-meaning governments continue to employ simplistic notions of what it would take to improve the quality of the lives of millions of people.

Brazil is a case in point. President Fernando Henrique Cardoso recently complimented his government for settling nearly half a million families on 18 million hectares

(45 million acres) at a cost to Brazilian taxpayers of 11.8 billion reals (\$5.9 billion).

There has been a decline in land-related killings, falling to 10 last year from 85 in 1984. But champions of landless peasants say that hundreds of thousands of families still do not have their own land. The Landless Rural Workers' Movement is now advocating additional policies that would enable people to work without necessarily being relocated on land of their own.

At the present pace of resettlement, Brazil will ultimately fail. Land distribution is among the most unequal in the world, with the richest 20% owning 90% of the land, while the poorest 40% hold 1%.

There is one way only to equalise people's property rights in Brazil, and it can be done quickly without a civil war provoked by the dispossession of the rich owners of their acres. *The solution is to abandon unjust taxes on the hard-earned wages of workers, and fund public services out of the rent of land.*

THE RADICAL approach to public finance is in tune with the geo-political realities of the globalised society.

History is in the making. The tectonic shifts in power relate to the way in which the nation-state is being rendered obsolete. Its power resides in the capacity to raise revenue. The threat of the money running out is something that politicians naturally fear. For without it, their power of patronage and of policing the state begins to slip away.

In the last decade, governments have come to realise that the tax base is eroding at an alarming rate. That explains why they are panicking to the point where their international mouthpieces, such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, are demanding a co-ordinated approach to tax policy. They call it "harmonisation"; in fact, this is no more than the attempt to cartelise the power that would otherwise slip from their grasp.

This threatens hope of developing a model that is sustainable in either the social or the environmental spheres. For the conventional wisdom on taxation is being consolidated in favour of policies that damage people's lifestyles and undermines our capacity to rearrange the way in which we use the resources of nature.

The policy that would free people is to be found in the way that we share in the income generated by land and natural resources. The environmental lobby now needs to integrate this fiscal instrument into its strategies for refining our relationships with our natural habitat.

In doing so, many of the social problems that continue to defeat governments would evaporate. People would be liberated to fine-tune new community and personal strategies which, in the fullness of time, would be recognised as constituting the foundations of a sustainable system.