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Environment in the Bush

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The environment always has been a major issue in Rural Australia. For as long as I can remember farmers have been worried about wind and water erosion, salinity, acidity, poor moisture retention, poor levels of one or more of the various plant nutrients, and getting more humus into the ground--in short soil quality in its many forms.

There is, however, a change in the way these problems are being viewed. In the first place people other than farmers are taking an interest in them. Second, the long-standing problems are being unhelpfully lumped together as environmental degradation. Third, although farm-land in total is becoming more productive, soils degradation is being seen in apocalyptic terms. And finally, the condition of our farmlands is being seen as a social problem rather than one for individual farmers to solve.

These changes are potentially serious and, by taking important aspects of farm management out of farmers' hands to place in the hands of bureaucrats and committees, <sup>they</sup> may do agriculture much harm. Farmers would be wise to remember that their industry is based upon private property rights. It has been successful because private owners have used their assets, particularly their land, wisely. Conservationists would do well to ask themselves whether, by taking land-use decisions away from individual farmers to be exercised instead by some 'social' mechanism, they might not turn the small mistakes of many farmers into big mistakes.

Private property is the best friend the environment has. Compare the cleanliness of a railway station with, say, <sup>that of</sup> a picture theatre. Sea stocks, which are held in common ownership, are regularly over-fished while the carrying capacity of farms, held in private ownership, is increasing. It is publicly owned reserves, not farms, which are most often infested with weeds, rabbits and 'roos. If pastoral leases are not extended many years before they expire, they will, of course, be over-stocked.

It will be objected that no one is suggesting taking farmers' land away from them to make into Russian or Chinese style collectives. That is true, but private property is, in fact, a bundle of rights--the right to sell, to lease, to plough, to graze, to crop, to clear, to plant trees on, and so on. There are always some limits placed by the government upon these. The essential difference between our market, capitalist society and feudal or socialist societies is that more of these property rights are private and fewer social. Social rights might be exercised by a State or Federal government, a Shire, a local soil conservation committee or some other collective purporting to act on behalf of the community, however 'community' is defined.

That the capitalist economies offer their people higher standards of living ~~hardly~~ surely needs no further emphasis. As we learn more about environmental degradation in Eastern Europe, that they also protect the environment better is becoming more apparent. We should, however, have long ago noted the evidence on this point available in Africa.

There are two reasons why social decisions are often inappropriate. The first is simply that politicians---including those on local committees<sup>s</sup>---are sometimes more interested in the exercise of power, or in forcing their theories upon others, than in anything else. Positions of power, however petty, do tend to attract bossy people who often do not have the humility to admit mistakes. The second is that there is no way that anyone can know all of the different circumstances to be found on farms, and general rules are often wrong for individual circumstances. The alternative to having detailed rules about land use, is to allow people---who are usually no less wise than their rulers---to do their own thing with their own land. We need not be concerned that ~~they~~ <sup>private owners</sup> will have less care for the next generation than a government which often does not think beyond the next election.

Individual choice usually works better than social choice, but only so long as the individuals bear close to the full costs of what ever it is they do. If, however, a farmer were to clear his land in such a way as to shed more surface water or saline ground water on people further down the valley, he would not be bearing the full cost himself. Economists would say he had created an externality. It is only to correct externalities that social action is needed or justified. And, even then, the laws limiting the externalities should be made with caution, lest they cause more problems than they solve.

The environmental doomsayers are creating a climate in which regulations restricting private property rights are being accepted in the belief that they are the only way to avoid impending disaster. We may rue the day when environmentalism was allowed to be a stalking horse for socialism. I look forward to the day when Greens demand privatisation of degraded public assets---but I am not holding my breath.

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