

LISTY DO REDAKCJI

LETTERS TO THE EDITORIAL OFFICE

Prace nad zrównoważonością Work on Sustainability

When I first started to work on sustainable agriculture more than 20 years ago, there was relatively little understanding of what sustainability was about and very little information available related specifically to sustainable agriculture. On issues related to the economics of sustainability, academic information was virtually nonexistent. In the early years, I thought I might make a significant contribution as an academic agricultural economist committed to sustainability.

Over the years, my work has paralleled the evolution of a new American food and farming economy - the emergence of the "new American farmer" in response to the market evolution from natural to organic and now to local foods. In the cause of sustainability, I have advocated for small farms, opposed large-scale confinement animal feeding operations (CAFOs), and called for radical changes in farm policies. I have talked with college students all across the nation on wide range of issues related to sustainability, including sustainable capitalism. I have addressed a diversity of issues, agricultural and otherwise, that I could never have imagined when I started on this journey in the late 1980s. I have managed to write four books along the way.

Today, almost nine years after my "retirement," there are lots of other people who are better able to do much of the work I have been trying to do. Today, there is a wealth of information on sustainable agriculture, - most of it freely available on the Internet - in spite of the fact that it has few advocates in the agricultural establishment. The emergence of the new food economy has broken into the mainstream media with the help of the Slow Food movement and folks like Alice Waters and Michael Pollan. The verdict is in on industrial agriculture; it has been found guilty in the court of scientific objectivity. Study after study has verified that CAFOs pollute the environment, threaten public health, and degrade the economic and social well-being of people in rural communities. Farm policies have changed very little, but there is now a growing consumer and taxpayer revolt against continuing government subsidies for a corporately controlled, industrial food system. Our mission may not be accomplished, but we have made a lot of progress, and others are now more capable than I of carrying on the struggle for agricultural sustainability.

One of the advantages of being old is that old people have had more time to acquire wisdom - the

judicious and purposeful application of objective knowledge and intuitive understanding gained from intellectual inquiry and personal experience. Living to an old age does not make one wise; it only gives one the opportunity to become so. Regardless, my comparative advantage now seems to be working on issues that require wisdom rather than new research or up-to-date information.

I want to focus my future work on restoring capitalism and reclaiming democracy. Our government has lost the consent of the governed and thus lacks the "just power" to govern, which it must have to restrain rampant economic extraction and exploitation of nature and society. Capitalism has degenerated into corporatism and our democracy has become a "corpocracy." A capitalist economy can function sustainably only within the context of a moral and just society. A corporatist government is incapable of moral or social restraint or guidance because corporations are not real people and thus have no ethical or social sense of right or wrong. Our corpocracy has corporate consent, but not the consent of the people governed. To reclaim our democracy and create a sustainable economy, we must first restore the consent of the governed.

We have elected a new President but he will be attempting to lead a deeply divided nation. As the delicate balance of power shifts back and forth from election to election, the electorate grows more deeply entrenched in their conflicting social and ethical values. Divisive issues, such as abortion, guns, religion, welfare, environmentalism, patriotism, and militarism, rise to the fore as each campaign becomes more viciously negative than the last. A 53% majority certainly does not represent a consensus of the people. A consensus requires general agreement on the values and principles that will underlie future decisions, not simply a majority vote to determine who gets to make those decisions. Consensus does not require unanimity but it does require acquiescence rather than defiance. Regardless of which party holds power, our government has lost the "consent of the governed."

We don't even agree on the fundamental purpose of government, although the Declaration of Independence clearly states the purpose of government is to ensure the "unalienable rights" of all people, including "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." It clearly states, "That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed." The most fundamental purpose of our government is to ensure that all receive an equitable and just measure of those things to which we have unalienable and thus inherently equal rights. One of the most basic principles of our democracy is that all

people are "created equal," and thus are of equal inherent worth - in spite of our inherently unequal ability to produce things of economic value and thus unequal wealth.

Our inherent and unalienable rights are not limited to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The preamble to our Constitution gives our government a responsibility to "establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity." We all have a right to these things. All of our legally guaranteed rights are embodied in our Constitution, including the initial Bill of Rights and later amendments. However, differing interpretations by the Supreme Court have eroded the public consensus regarding our constitutional rights and even the basic purpose of our government. With Supreme Court decisions so often divided five-to-four, we agonize over each new appointment to the Court. With each appointment and each new decision, new constitutional rights may be granted or denied, even though the Constitution remains unchanged.

Many important questions of rights have not been specifically addressed by the Court, such as whether we have rights to food, housing, education, health care, or a clean environment, or whether future generations also have rights. Fortunately, our Constitution was meant to be amended, as we become "more enlightened, as new discoveries are made, new truths discovered and manners and opinions change" - in the words of Thomas Jefferson. Article V of the Constitution defines the amendment process - clearly a process for building consensus among the governed.

I have suggested that if President-elect Obama truly wants to be President of a "united people" rather than "divided people," he should form a national commission to establish the process for drafting and approving a new Bill of Rights to address the issues that now divide us. If we are to restore the just powers of government, we must be willing to spend the considerable time and energy as a people to reestablish the consent of the governed.

My list of amendments to be included in this new Bill of Rights - specifically to address the critical issues of sustainability, would include:

1. Corporations, not being natural persons, have no right to participate in any way in the process amending the Constitution. The privileges of corporations are distinct from the rights of natural persons.
2. All people have the right to be protected from all forms of economic exploitation. No person has the right to benefit economically at the expense of another.

3. All people have the right to a clean and healthy environment. No person has the right to foul the environment in which another must live or work.
4. All people of future generations have an equal right to the world's natural and cultural resources. The rights of future generations are equal in all respects to those of the present.

I do not plan to try to start a campaign to develop a new bill of rights. I just want to spend a lot more time thinking, writing, and talking about the need for Americans to reclaim our democracy if we expect to create a sustainable economy - or a sustainable agriculture. Regardless of whether I am writing or talking about local foods, small farms, CAFOs, farm policy, sustainable agriculture, or sustainable capitalism, I want to emphasize the necessity of restoring the legitimacy of government by restoring the consent of the governed - beginning at the grass roots, at the individual and local community level.

I honestly would like to spend less time on the road next year. So, I won't be disappointed if I get fewer speaking requests next year. I hope to celebrate my 69th birthday next month and am rapidly approaching my allotted "three score and ten." Those of you who travel a good bit know how stressful and tiring it can be these days with the security lines and flight delays and cancellations. I don't want to limit my speaking engagements by charging speaking fees because I feel I am often of the most benefit to those who can barely cover my travel expenses. So I will still accept speaking invitations where I think I, a) might contribute something uniquely useful to the event, b) can get reimbursed for my travel expenses, c) have the date open on my calendar, and d) can also promote the restoration of capitalism and reclamation of democracy.

I will continue to give priority to opportunities to visit with students on college campuses. Thoughtful young people, who haven't yet made up their minds about how the world works and their place within it, tend to be more receptive than their elders to the big questions and issues of sustainability. They have the most to gain or lose from the success or failure of our efforts to restore capitalism and reclaim democracy. Finally, I want to support, not duplicate, the ongoing work of others on these important issues and I welcome the support and collaboration of others who may feel inclined to join in this cause.

John Ikerd
e-mail: JEIkerd@centurytel.net
website: <http://web.missouri.edu/~ikerdj/>