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Government by NGO

by Walter Starck

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The dictionary defines *stakeholder* as a person or group that has a financial investment, share, or other significant personal interest in some thing or activity. In law such status is recognised by the concept of legal standing (*locus standi*) and it requires the ability to demonstrate sufficient connection to a matter to be potentially harmed by the legal outcome. There is a well-established body of law which recognises a right to have a voice in affairs which affect us personally; but, we have no right to interfere in matters remote from ourselves which are, in effect, none of our business.

However, almost without notice, environmentalism has redefined the fundamental concept of being a stakeholder. Despite having nothing invested and with no risk to themselves, environmental Non-government organisations (NGOs) have managed to claim the status of stakeholders in remote matters and be accorded an equal voice to those whose entire lives, livelihood and assets are being affected.

In addition to the stakeholder caper, the NGOs also have managed to insert themselves as regulators collecting healthy fees as well. This takes the form of a protection racket offering environmental “certification” to businesses which cooperate and pay substantial sums to become environmentally certified. This has worked like a treat in the food and timber industries, where the market is dominated by a few large retailers.

It works like this: the eco-mob set up an environmental certification entity, then besiege the retailers with a PR campaign designed to simulate and stimulate a public demand for environmental certification of the target product. For the retailers it’s a no brainer. The public seems to want it. It makes them look good and has no apparent cost to themselves. The primary producers then find themselves having to sign up for certification and toe the eco-line if they want to sell their products.

In circumstances where there are diverse retailers who are too difficult to coerce or where it is obvious the customers really don’t care, the eco-mob have found another way to stand over the producers by teaming up with the bureaucracy. Eco certification costs the bureaucrats nothing and it makes their own management look good, so they are prone to cooperate. In addition, they already have a structure in place to provide a sham appearance of industry “consultation” and agreement with whatever they want to do, so foisting eco-certification onto the producers is only a routine doddle for them.

Any troublesome farmers, fishermen or graziers are simply ignored. The deal is done with a few handbags from an industry “peak body” which the bureaucrats effectively own and control through a grant that funds the cost of an office and a few full-time staff.

Certification is a sweet racket. It not only provides substantial management control, but also collects fat fees and provides ongoing free advertising about the great job the self-appointed eco-saviours are doing to “save” the environment for the rest of us.

That the environmental NGOs have managed to usurp such influence and outright power with so little objection, even questioning, is remarkable. Even more so is the fact that the most influential groups (*e.g.* WWF, Pew, Greenpeace) are not even Australian organizations but foreign entities controlled by distant and largely unknown persons accountable to no one. Are they caring and competent or fundamentalist fanatics, perhaps even minions of forces with darker agendas? We don’t have a clue but are simply going along like sheep to wherever they want and whatever awaits us.

Whatever their motivations and competence, the direction the environmentalists are taking us does not look good. Consider just a few points:

- With the world’s largest *per capita* fishing zone we have restricted our industry to the world’s lowest harvest rate and must import nearly three-quarters of the seafood we consume. All these imports are coming from resources much more heavily exploited than our own.
- With extensive native forests of some of the most durable timbers in the world we have prohibited its harvest. Instead, we build our extravagantly costly housing with low-grade plantation pine, which will greatly reduce the useful life of those structures.
- Across the entire spectrum of our primary producers, participation, productivity and profitability are all steadily declining under the burden of ever-increasing environmental restrictions and demands. The fastest-rising food prices in the OECD world and 30% of our fresh produce now coming from imports are the direct consequences.
- Aquaculture is the fastest growing food producing sector in the world; but, in Australia it has been stagnant for a decade, despite having better natural conditions for it than anywhere else. The sole reason for the lack of aquaculture development here is insanely complex, uncertain and costly environmental restrictions and requirements.
- Liquid fuel is indispensable for transport and heavy mobile machinery. Tractors, trucks, trains, planes, ships and bulldozers cannot be run on batteries, at least with any existing technology. We have to import about 60% of our liquid fuel and that portion is expected to rise to 80% by 2020. With proven technology we could economically produce all of the liquid fuel we require from coal and or natural gas. Such fuel would be cheaper, cleaner, more secure and save about \$18 billion per annum on our trade deficit at current prices. The only reason we do not do this is adherence to environmental correctness regarding CO₂ emissions from fossil fuels. Even more idiotic, we still emit the CO₂ by using the imported fuel.
- Electricity prices in Australia are higher than in countries buying coal from us to generate their power, even though they must ship it thousands of miles to their power stations while ours are located right next to the mines. Again, it is misguided environmental regulations that play a major role in this economic travesty.

Surely environmentalism must be God’s (or perhaps Allah’s) gift to terrorism. If one wanted to wreak havoc on this nation there couldn’t be a better means. Explosives are difficult to obtain and put in place without getting caught. The damage they inflict is also very limited in time and place.

Environmentalism, however, makes it easy to strike at the very heart of the economy. It can be done safely and openly. The damage is widespread and ongoing. The government will even help with grants and regulations. To top it off, the perpetrators will be seen by many as righteous heroes. If you get off on inflicting human misery and carnage, you don't have to forego that pleasure. Hundreds of bankruptcies, family breakups and suicides every year among primary producers should provide ample satisfaction for even the most sadistic misanthropist.

If one were aiming for maximal damage one might try things like making large areas of the ocean off limits to fishing, prohibiting logging in native forests, cutting back farmers' use of water for irrigation, forcing graziers to let their best grazing land be taken over by useless scrub, and imposing expensive, arbitrary, ever-changing environmental demands on aquaculture and small miners. Then, for anyone doing anything productive, add a morass of fees, restrictions and requirements for no practical purpose other than harassment. Finally, enforce it all with severe fines for any infringement.

That this kind of thing has been growing progressively worse every year is clearly apparent. That malignant environmentalism has been a driving force is also obvious. The only thing not clear is how much of it is simply due to well-meaning ignorance and incompetence, and how much is deliberate malfeasance born of malicious intent.

To make matters even worse for producers there has also been a widespread adoption by government of a strict interpretation of the precautionary principle. This pernicious bit of intellectual swill mandates that any hypothetical risk to the environment must be addressed by full preventative measures as if it were certain. As a final touch, the burden of proof for no harm then rests on anyone who does not agree. The fact that proof of a negative is logically impossible conveniently eliminates any effective dissent. It doesn't require much ability to come up with some possibility of detriment which cannot be absolutely disproven. Much of our environmental regulation now deals with what amounts to hypothetical solutions to imaginary problems.

The most dangerous threat to Australia does not come from the fundamentalist extremes of religion. The damage to national wellbeing that they have achieved is negligible. Environmentalism, however, has successfully inflicted huge damage, regardless of whether it was intended or has just been the unintended consequence of well-meaning incompetence. This has heavily impacted our wealth, health, food, homes, education, personal freedom and indeed the well-being of the entire nation. It has devastated the lives of tens of thousands of honest, hardworking producers and greatly impoverished the livelihood of most of those who still manage to survive.

Australia now faces what increasingly looks to become the worst economic crisis in its history. The developing situation is far more serious than is being publically acknowledged or seemingly even recognised. The confluence of critical factors is real and growing. These include:

- An ageing population with an unprecedented portion of old people living longer and requiring extravagantly expensive medical care. This demographic must be supported by a smaller-than-ever working sector.
- A highly urbanised population concentrated in vast resource sinks utterly dependent upon a continuous inflow of food, water, energy and manufactured goods from outside.
- A level of personal debt higher than the US prior to the housing crash.

- Banks with most of their assets tied up in grossly inflated real estate and dependent upon high levels of overseas borrowing to sustain prices.
- Ongoing declines in overall manufacturing and food production.
- Iron ore, coal and gas prices unlikely to rebound soon and likely to decline further.
- High costs in a mining industry now dominated by multinational companies with numerous options elsewhere.
- Large scale layoffs in mining plus numerous development project cancellations which will manifest in significantly reduced government revenue, falling retail sales and increasing numbers of homes forced onto an already stressed market.
- A proliferation of bureaucracy that is now a major impediment to any and every kind of productive activity.

The Australian economy, and indeed the whole interconnected global economy is in a far more vulnerable condition than is being publically admitted. Financial crises tend to develop slowly over a period of years. The problems go unnoticed at first, then continue to worsen amid a state of denial that thrives right up the point of collapse. This finally comes in a rush when the bubble of delusion bursts and denial turns to panic.

Experience indicates that denial and delusion will prevent any serious reform until a crash wipes out the *status quo* and makes change unavoidable. What happens next depends on what ideas are available. It is time to start thinking in this regard.

Certainly we have created more government than our productive sector can support, and we have vastly too much regulation that costs more than it benefits. As the non-productive portion of the population has increased it also seems to have been accompanied by a commensurate increase in the level of moralistic social, political, economic and environmental attitudes loosely referred to as “political correctness”. It appears that, confronted by a choice between gratitude tinged by a bit of guilt on the one hand or an imaginary moral superiority on the other, the non-producers tend to prefer the latter.

The farmers, graziers, fishermen, foresters and miners who provide our food, our houses and the energy which makes life comfortable have themselves become an endangered species. They are now in very real danger of extinction from the devastating impacts of rampant environmentalism. If serious steps are not taken to save them, the coming economic storm is likely to be a final straw for many of them. The consequences of this for the urban masses is frightening to even try to imagine.

One thing seems certain and that is management of the environment on which we all ultimately depend for survival is far too important to leave in the hands of self-appointed amateurs and bureaucratic meddlers playing with computer games in air-conditioned offices. No one is better qualified by genuine real world knowledge, or has greater personal investment in and genuine commitment to the health of the environment than the primary producers themselves. Unless they are permitted to have a decisive voice in management and the “stakeholders” with nothing invested are side-lined, we could soon begin to see empty shelves in our supermarkets and empty bank accounts at the check-out lines.

On the bright side, at least the obesity problem should quickly disappear and the urban greens will have the opportunity to discover for certain just what and who is truly sustainable.

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