

Maybe the branch was rotten . . . Some thoughts on John Halkett's article¹

John's article has been nagging at my mind for some while now, something not ringing true. The forest is going sure enough in many places, no doubt of that, but the explanation, the blame . . . isn't it all a little too easy? Slay a few dragons, reveal the message to those in the darkness of ignorance, lead the blind into the light, sow truth, and all will be well.

Haven't we heard it all before? In other clothes such attitudes embarrass us, as well as being considered insensitive and totally ineffective. So why do we think they may work now?

Combine that approach with the conjuring up of devils, hamburger fiends, humanoid economists etc, and we are on even more shaky ground. Was it by accident we left off the yellow peril, the bolshevik menace and the protocols of zion, or do we keep them for next time?

A few months ago I found myself on the bank of a river on the equator watching a barge being loaded with 3000 tonnes of furniture blanks for Britain. It represented, I suppose, 200 ha of logging.

I don't know how often that mill repeats the exercise, or how many times on how many other rivers it is repeated, but certainly very little of the natural forest round there is destined for sustained use management. In 10 or 20 years very little is likely to be left. Land use maps have been prepared, concessions allocated and settlement schemes begun.

Sometime later I was in England and took a look at why such large quantities of wood might be needed there. When I left 25 years ago there was a thriving industry based on local hardwoods. What had happened to it?

At first all seemed well. The radio breakfast show one morning featured an interview on a "green" approach to Christmas. The chatterer found it hard going; her subject declined interest in druids, bran and a vegetarian celebration of yule in favour of turkey and alcohol, all distressingly normal.

But then a brainwave, "but of course no presents from the rain forest?" The answer was immediate and definite: "Of

course not. There are plenty of British hardwoods."

That seemed to settle it, but as I looked around I became less certain. My mother's country, where I was, is very well wooded, mostly hardwoods, and being broken and wet it has always avoided those twin plagues of rural England, intensive agriculture and pheasant shooting. It grows all kinds of trees very well, given the chance.

But the local mills were all cutting softwoods, and as I looked around I realised that there was nothing else to cut. Years of take and no put, of admiring woodlands for the beauty only, had claimed their price – very beautiful but entirely unproductive woodland. And so I found it to be everywhere. Here was a part of the answer to that barge load of timber.

A little later I read a review of a book which the reviewer described as seminal to a new British forestry policy². So I got it.

It begins hopefully enough with a foreword claiming that "a landscape without trees is about as inviting as the surface of the moon", and then puts all its effort into attacking the planting of trees on Britain's treeless uplands.

The plantations, necessarily spartan on country deforested often centuries ago and since continually burned, are dismissed as mere "cellulose factories", blamed for extracting polluted moisture from the air instead of allowing it to drift on to Norway, and derided as the investment interest of pop singers, professional snooker players, pension funds and other joke people.

Even the fact that they have suc-

ceeded in increasing the local content of wood demand from 7% to 12% in 25 years is held against them (the graph is a centimetre high; so even a doubling of production is hardly noticeable). The proper place for wood production, in the author's view, is the tropics, since trees grow faster there.

Down in the plantation the darkies sing as they shoulder the white man's burden.

A proper forest policy for Britain would concentrate on natural values and the preservation of "Heritage". Production is treated as something unimportant and not to be mentioned in polite company. It can be left for those few areas where higher values do not prevail.

There is no concern at all for the impact of such a policy on other people's forests. (Britain imports about 40 million m³ of round wood equivalent a year, and has done for the last 25 years. Over that period home-grown production has risen from 2.5 million to 5 million m³/year.) The clear picture is of a society which has moved upwind and over the hill from those dark satanic mills, but woe betide them if they are not there when needed.

In the author's favour he makes a clear case that something has gone wrong with Britain's forest policy. A system born in the post-war years when agriculture was king set out to encourage tree planting through the back door by a system of convoluted tax concessions.

It will come as no surprise to anyone that generations of cunning accountants have turned loopholes into caverns, and that many plantations exist more on paper than as productive entities.

The fact that such subterfuge was seen

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¹ *Sawing off the Branch we are sitting on.* John Halkett, NZ Forestry.

² *Forestry in Crisis.* Steve Tompkins. Christopher Hel, London, 1989

to be necessary would seem to say something a little uncomplimentary about the oft-claimed British love of trees. Perfidious Albion yet again?

But clearly it was time for a change and it appears that changes have been made. However, as in New Zealand, they have come on the skirts of less indulgent agricultural policies, and it is not clear yet if they represent anything other than cosmetic changes of attitudes to trees.

It is not easy to see the relevance of Mr Tompkins' work to our conditions. Indeed, with its contempt for commerce, sly digs at uppity tall poppies from the working classes and generally insular attitude, it could be read simply as an illustration of the darker side of British eccentricity.

But our background comes very much from there, so perhaps it may help to explain some of our own cultural oddities. The attitudes portrayed have also produced a fossilised education system which leaves a large part of its clientele unqualified and disillusioned with future study, so that Britain now has almost developing country reservoirs of skill by comparison with its neighbours.

We have followed that same path with the same results. Are we destined to do so in our greening too?

That is too big a question to answer here, except that Mr Tompkins' description of the British Forestry Commission and its illusions, by coincidence exactly fits the structure of our new Conservation Department.

In his view, control of very large physical resources coupled with responsibility for policy inevitably leads to the latter being written to support in-house views of management of the former. The resultant aberration in Britain he sees to have been conifer plantations at the expense of hardwoods. In our case it looks like being preservation at the expense of conservation.

Another curiosity, somewhat related to the attitudes just mentioned, is the new crisis which has struck the British environmental movement very much below the belt. Much British wildland is a product of deforestation, continual burning and casual grazing on poor soils. The result is a culturally important but impermanent seral stage.

For various reasons the checks on nature have been removed in many places and she is on the march again. "Hardwood scrub" invades, bracken and blackberry too. The soil pH rises, furred and feathered immigrants flock in, and the denizens of poverty are thrust out.

The current catch-cry is thus for a crusade to "preserve infertility", and many learned papers are being written on the skills needed to halt nature in her tracks.

Don't blame me if all this sounds a

little bizarre when viewed from afar. But again, is it relevant to us or is it just cultural glue, like carnival in Rio or clan battles in New Guinea?

On the one hand of course, it is important – they want wood, we have it – but there is a darker side.

Expressed in raw cellulose, Britain's imports represent:

- either – an annual dipterocarp logging programme of about one million hectares/year, done in a non-sustainable fashion
- or – 55 tropical forest pulp projects of about 200,000 hectares each
- or – about two million hectares of radiata pine plantation.

Our author argues that this is irrelevant to the formulation of British forestry policy, as there is no clear relation between imports and tropical forest disappearance.

Well, certainly, the connection is not always direct. In the Amazon for example, clearance is for land, not cellulose, and anything not used is burnt (as it was in New Zealand). But in general I think most people would accept that it makes little difference how you take water out of a barrel; the level goes down just the same.

The Government of the country I was first in has before it some 40 applications for land on which to establish cellulose plantations. They involve some 10 million hectares of land, mostly rain forest, and many will certainly not eventuate. But quite a few will. They see Europe (in particular Britain) as a significant part of their market.

John Halkett in his enthusiasm ventures I think onto, for him, unfamiliar ground, probably unsympathetic too. The shadow of international conspiracy lies heavily on his article and the air is thick with demons.

Of course this approach has its uses, as it divides the cast into "them" (bad) and "us" (good). Being firmly in the good camp, with our complaint carried away by a convenient scapegoat (or whole flock of them), we can go about our daily business unchanged except for a small halo and a strong odour of sanctity. We have proved that we care and are absolved from blame.

Blaming disaster on the cattle demon is in this context particularly inappropriate. The acquisition of land and cattle is central to our culture wherever it manifests itself – in New Zealand, Australia, Europe and all the Americas too, as well as in many other places in rather different ways.

In Britain when I grew up the owner of fine woods and profitable trees was regarded at best as eccentric. The lords of creation were the cattlemen (stud stock preferably), and it was they who

dominated the agricultural shows and the rural economy, and where town money went when it was time to rise socially.

In no place (least of all New Zealand) does the role model gather jungle berries or medicinal plants. He sits on a horse, smokes a popular brand of cigarette, and you can find him in "Dallas", on "Country Calendar", or in the flesh just over the next hill.

I remember being told in Belize that only one man had ever made money out of cattle there, by using them as a front for marijuana plantations. But every year hopeful investors came to buy a few hundred or thousand hectares, put up a gateway with cows' horns on it, cut down all the trees except one or two near the house, and re-christen the place "cool shade ranch" or some such.

After a few years of battling uproarious vegetation, jaguars, light fingered locals and some of the more unpleasant members of the insect creation, they would leave. The forest then returned to await the next investor with a dream.

We look in the mirror and we see ourselves, but what to do if we do not like what we see? The destruction of the tropical rain forest is a great shame. It may even be the great disaster that some predict, but it cannot be claimed to be unexpected or a surprise, since it is simply the present step in something that began with the dawn of human history.

The easiest went first and so we come to the more difficult. It is something that foresters have always had to live with.

In the beginning, the process was excused by ascribing the collapse of civilisations which had squandered their resources to hubris – overweening pride and loose morals. Later the process was excused on the grounds that there is always plenty "somewhere else" – a view not yet dead, as Mr Tompkins makes clear.

Now it becomes clearer that there is not, the pressure to do nothing continues, though of course it wears different clothes. It comes now from economists (who have in part inherited the "something else, somewhere else" philosophy) and from those environmentalists whose millennial philosophies prefer cataclysm to evolution.

When all this is combined with the explosive missionary urge that is so strong a part of our culture, some strange things happen. These are well described in another interesting if rather peevish book³ which came out last year.

It reviews the evolution of international aid into international bureau-

³ *The Lords of Poverty*. Graham Hancock. McMillan, London, 1989

crazy, and reaches two basic conclusions: those who have forgone aid have done best, and most aid money anyway vanishes into vast and impenetrable bureaucracies.

What little does get out mostly serves to prop up tyrannical or abstract regimes which otherwise might be swept away by their outraged subjects.

Unfortunately prejudice (the author clearly has a bone to pick with the agencies in question, and this blurs his case) prevents things being taken further into discussion of the validity of the basic concept of international compassion and the global village. Both, being too large for the individual to comprehend, become at best soothing sounds and in practice, institutionalised.

Are they in fact just one more expression of the need for a scapegoat, of offloading responsibility for doing anything about ourselves?

It begins to seem that they may be, and it is the failure to recognise this that blurs John Halkett's case.

The first book that I mention makes it clear that the essence of a national envi-

ronmental policy is to shove all the dirty bits somewhere else. This is old practice of course and it is generally what town and country planning is all about. But at least in the old days it remained all within one frontier.

Now the suggestion seems to be in effect (for of course it is not said) that the process should be internationalised.

There is some similarity here with another old theory, that the path to paradise is the same for everyone – rural poverty – industrial exploitation – democracy – with countries at different stages along the path. If this is so of course, the move of forest production (along with cars, steel mills etc) to developing lands is in effect a form of aid. We offer them a rung on our ladder.

Certainly this approach is claimed to be successful by many developing countries themselves. They look at where we are at and how we got there, and reassure themselves that they are following the right path.

Our protests that this is not so fall on deaf ears, because on closer inspection

they cannot see that we accept it for ourselves. It is a philosophy strictly for export. They fly over New Zealand and in many places see very few trees, only scarred hills. They ask to see examples of sustained yield forestry, only to be told it is gone, finished. They ask to see how we integrate humanity and natural values, and we show them our Conservation Department, whose mission it is to keep them apart. When they ask for a solution, we offer tourism, us coming to gawk at them.

Naturally they go away bewildered.

The erosion of the tropical forest now has a momentum which will not slow down for many years to come. Preaching certainly will not stop that, but example might help.

If that is so, we should perhaps look to adopting policies which might become role models, rather than those which simply dump the responsibility somewhere else.

Then we might make some progress.

J. Purey-Cust

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