

## Selling our birthrights

ONE OF THE SILLIER NONSENSSES of modern economists is the belief that things held in trust for the community, by the state, are always wasteful. The people who guide the Government in such areas appear to know the price of everything and the value of nothing.

So we have seen in recent years a rapid sale of state assets and a discarding of publicly owned utilities. In return New Zealand has received some small reduction in public debt, a freer trading environment and a lot of unemployment with its attendant social costs. Most of us agree that the old New Zealand could not continue without some rationalisation.

Still there remains a touching faith that market forces will solve all our problems. We now have in control of the public service a generation of economists who can have little regard for the enriching social environment of New Zealand; the history and values which make up the consciousness of being New Zealanders. That heritage includes the concept of setting aside reserves for the enjoyment of future generations and the protection of species from extinction. It includes the right to wander by water, the enjoyment of the sea coast, of access to the countryside. Having disposed of their statutory responsibilities for such hungry economic beasts as Think Big, the railways, telecommunications, and public broadcasting, the people who drive the new New Zealand have now moved into the environmental and social aspects of our lives.

In recent weeks Auckland has been threatened with the sale of its harbour, including potential wildlife reserves and recreation areas. In the far south people have had to fight to preserve the integrity of Lake Manapouri threatened with privatisation of the power station. The beech forests of the South Island have been put back on the chipping block, in part because free market forces demonstrate it is more expedient to chip them for Japan than it is to encourage small-scale local industries round the skirts of forests. What local industry could do for local communities is not a value taken into account by free marketers.

There are signs that the Government is occasionally prepared to exercise some control over public assets, in areas where they have given up funding and control but still retain the shares. Electricorp is one such company, which by its extensive investment in hydroelectric power generation has a traumatic impact on our waterways. Yet now the economic ayatollahs are suggesting that water itself be put up for auction. Conservationists would bid against polluters, power generators, processors and others for ownership of what is presently ours by right.

It is the ultimate stupidity to allow commercial trade in what has developed with our civilisation as people's rights – to common water, access to the countryside, and the conservation of the environment for future generations.

Forest and Bird is just one of the many community groups whose members keep alive the conscience and consciousness of New Zealand and its values. While stating the case for conservation we may also need to say, occasionally, that some of the proposals of our bureaucrats are silly, if not downright dangerous. Otherwise we could lose our environmental advances and sorely prejudice our future, simply for the sake of a fad of political fashion.

**Gordon Ell**

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