

# One-dimensional people

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Politics, philosophy and economics were the subjects of my first degree. Some of the PolSci lecturers tried to argue that all political thought could fit on a one-dimensional spectrum from left to right wing. Some economists tried to persuade us that all goods and services could, theoretically anyway, be valued somewhere on a dollar-scale. This colour-blind view insults the complexity and beauty of the world, and portrays it merely in shades of grey.

We see the same thinking in many Resource Management issues. What is the cost of a polluted river, an eroded hillside, a ravaged forest? What is the value of the kokako species (not \$7 million according to the late Muldoon)? What size mess-of-pottage would we accept for our birthright – Young Nick's Head, beaches, mountains, forests? Is it cost-effective to stop pumping greenhouse gases into the atmosphere relative to the expected future harm they will do? Put a dollar value on the benefits and disbenefits of any action and compare the two. Simple.

To show that there are values other than dollar values, I once asked (volunteer!) forestry students to fill out a questionnaire. How much money would they need to receive to perform various public indignities, indecencies and sacrilegious acts? What would they accept for the virginity of a daughter or sister? What would they ask for various body parts (one finger, one kidney, one eye, both eyes)? How much to spend a year, 10 years, 50 years, in jail? What to kill or torture a fellow human? And so forth. It is not that some of these things are worth infinity dollars. Some have easily ascertained and relatively modest market values. It is just that you and I may not want to live the sort of life where we stoop to that level. Even the most hard-bitten materialist can get the message. Sure, maximise your income if you wish, but only subject to certain lifestyle constraints. You may be forced to do things you detest in emergency situations, but a fair market price is based on the principle of "willing buyer, willing seller".

The mindless asset-accumulation of modern Western society is a collective aberration. A social disease, that we don't even realise we possess. In the million or so years of hominid evolution, we have mostly been hunter-gatherers. Possessions were absolutely useless unless we could carry them with us. Only in the last 10 000 years (a mere 400 generations) have some – but not all – humans developed settlements where it made sense to clutter one's life with material objects. Income-generation is not hard-wired into the human brain – we have many drives and desires, fears and taboos with a far deeper pedigree.

At this point, economists usually pontificate about the need for rational decision-making in a resource-constrained world. For example a public committee, they say, has a limited budget and is forced to choose between swimming pools, superannuation subsidies, sewers, sex education and saving the whales. Funny

how these resource constraints get worse the more prosperous we become.

Imagine a slave-owner in early Rome considering an offer for his slave, who is to be tortured and killed in the Colosseum. The slave earns a valuable income in the vineyard, but the cash offer is attractive. A simple DCF analysis, comparing a fixed sum with an annuity? In our 21<sup>st</sup> century wisdom, we might consider that the slave's views should also be part of the equation. Similarly, in cases involving maltreatment of non-human species such as dogs or whales. But is it only a question of pain receptors? What of species such as plants, do they have any rights? What of rivers, lakes, rocks and mountains? Our animist forebears certainly thought such things deserved respect. Do humans have the right to trash the planet in any way they think fit, provided the action accords with sound economics?

In a consent application, should "society" be one of the stakeholders? Is it true, as some Americans would have us believe, that the Individual is paramount and that the State has no moral authority over-and-above that of its constituents? Eastern peoples do not share this view, and indeed, perhaps we can explain the difference in crime rate between Japan and the USA by the cultural attitude towards the role of Society. Mostly, throughout human evolution, the wants and needs of the individual took second place to that of the extended family and the tribe. Even the tribal chief had to bow to customs and superstitions, which were largely the cumulative wisdom of long-departed ancestors.

For too long the New Zealand forestry sector has not had the breadth of knowledge to appreciate alternative viewpoints. It acted like a possum in a spotlight when the NZFS was dismantled, when the indigenous forests were locked up, when Maori land claims surfaced, when the brakes were applied to genetic engineering or timber preservation, and when carbon sequestration became a real issue. Bolts out of the blue? Not so, these attitudes were commonplace throughout society, albeit not in the incestuous world of forestry. Irrational viewpoints? Perhaps, and just as irrational as single-minded materialism. But then, humans are irrational, and so what?

Getting back to Resource Management hearings. In my view, those things that can easily and accurately be quantified, should be quantified. Those things that can appropriately be given a dollar value should be so treated. But, with regard to all the rest, decision-makers should not be afraid to use their subjective judgement. To attempt anything else is to deceive ourselves. Furthermore, no apologies have to be made for our essential humanity.

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