

Forests: Profit with Pleasure

by Marion Shoard

published in The Times, 17 June 1989

Marion Shoard offers a blueprint for a successful privatization

In an apparently insignificant parliamentary answer yesterday, the Government discreetly unveiled what could prove an even bigger programme of environmental privatization than that embodied in the much vilified, vote-losing Water Bill.

Malcolm Rifkind, Secretary of State for Scotland, announced that by the end of the century 247,000 acres of the state's forests will be sold off to private owners. This amounts to 9 per cent of the Forestry Commission's total holdings.

Since 1981 about 7 per cent has already been sold off, with no real public discussion of the issues involved. The Government doubtless hopes to see further steady erosion through the next century until our public forestry industry, currently the biggest single owner of land in Britain, is just a memory.

Doubtless the unexpected storm of protest which the Water Bill precipitated is the reason for the "softly softly" approach this time round. The absence of the parliamentary Bill means there need be no parliamentary debate. Yet if the Government imagines it can slip this one past a public which is now acutely environmentally aware, it is going to be disappointed.

Forestry is already the subject of intense environmental concern. The industry stands accused of destroying the attractions of much of our countryside by blanketing it in grim ranks of alien conifers, thus exacerbating the problem of acid rain, and of threatening areas of global wildlife importance, such as the Flow Country in northern Scotland.

Recreation considerations are almost as pressing. As a public body with public responsibilities, the Forestry Commission tends to encourage visitors: it has opened more than 600 picnic places and 700 forest trails. Most private forests, on the other hand, are inaccessible. Where new owners have closed off former Commission plantations, fierce controversy has already resulted.

Such considerations ensure not only that forest privatization will be noticed, but that it will prove explosive if mishandled. The back-door approach which the Government seems to be adopting makes it more, rather than less, likely that an explosion will occur, wreaking damage not only on the Government's green credibility but on the contribution which our forests can make to our national life.

It is all very sad. For privatization need damage neither our forests nor government credibility. Carried out in the right way it could do wonders for both. All the Government has to do is to learn the lessons of its unhappy experience over the Water Bill, instead of trying to avoid a repeat performance by stealth.

No tears need be shed over the demise of state forestry per se. The industry is absurd even by the standards of its nationalized peers. At today's prices, the taxpayer has invested £2.5 billion in Forestry Commission plantations covering more than two million acres of Great Britain. In return, he has become the proud owner of trees worth around £1.5 billion. Whereas state steel and ship-building did at least provide a lot of jobs, the taxpayer's unproductive flutter on the forests has produced few social, economic or benefits.

Now that forest privatization is coming, what matters is the form in which it comes. And what matters above all is that privatization should not be allowed to become the only component of Government policy for the industry, as it appeared to in the case of water. Instead, privatization should be just part of a full-scale reorganization, not just of the state's forests, but of Britain's even more expansive private forests as well.

Whoever owns the plantations, we need an overall strategy which gives proper recognition to the wildlife, landscape and recreation considerations which are nowadays arguably as important a feature of forest management as the economically questionable process of timber production.

Sadly there was little sign of any such strategic thinking in Rifkind's statement yesterday. It left the impression that, as in the case of water, the Government is more concerned with selling than with governing. Rifkind expressed the pious hope that public access would be maintained after sell-offs, but only insofar as was compatible with the new owners' activities.

If the Government proceeds with its policy of furtive sales unsupported by other measures, what safeguards will there be for the public interest in our forests?

At present, the Forestry Commission combines management of the state's forests with regulating the private sector. If nothing else changes after it loses its own holdings, it will exercise its present regulatory powers over all the country's forests and woods. These powers will give the commission some influence over deforestation and new planting, but these will not be sufficient to enable it to match overall forestry practice to the nation's real needs.

Even the right-wing think tanks, which have been promoting forest privatization, have recognized that it needs to be accompanied by a new form of environmental regulation. The Adam Smith Institute and the Institute of Economic Affairs have both suggested that after privatization the extent, location and composition of new planting should be subjected to planning control by local or national park authorities.

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This would undoubtedly be a welcome step, and it might enable councils to hold back new conifer planting. Unfortunately, the Government is in no mood to give new planning powers to local councils. On February 20, in a press release, Rifkind specifically ruled out extending planning control to forestry.

So is there an instrument for securing the objectives of a new national forestry strategy which would be more in keeping with present government practice? Giving new powers to the rump Forestry Commission would not be a good idea. The commission's background, history and membership (which is dominated by large private landowners) makes it too inextricably entangled with timber production interests to be credible as the agent of the public will. A better model for a new body can be found in the Water Bill's National Rivers Authority.

Forestry privatization could be accompanied by the creation of a new National Forests Authority firmly committed to promoting all aspects of the new national strategy. Its membership could reflect the full range of interests associated with the industry and its land, so that commercial foresters would be in a minority.

Both the buyers of the commission's forests and the existing forest and woodland owners may be required to accept whatever commitments the NFA chose to impose on them. These might include wholly new requirements, such as a general right of public access of the kind which exists in West German forests, or a quota for locally characteristic native broadleaved trees in existing conifer plantations.

This pattern - with the tough environmental regulator containing the pursuit of private profit within the bounds of the public interest - would do more than ensure a fuss-free forest sale for the Government. It would enable it to plant living testimony to the reality of its green conversion all over our countryside. And it would allow the rest of us to walk, ride and picnic in better, not just privatized, forests.

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