

write a paper
on the topic for presentation at this Conference. I want to thank all those who
prompted
me, especially Peter and my Assembly, for encouraging this result.

Even as I finalised the paper in June, Sydney was sodden with rain and northern
Victoria had experienced some flooding. But one can easily show that
drought-affected
farmers recover slowly even though a drought may have broken. Though the grass
may be
green, the financial position of many may remain uncertain for an indefinite
period.

Agriculture must be more soundly based than this - it has been estimated that
the
world's population "is virtually sure to double before it stabilizes in the
middle to
latter half of the 22nd century ... at a level of about 12.5 billion (people)
some 160
years from now.... Agriculturally, the challenge is huge".[1] Part of the
answer is
to understand the role farmers play and will play in the coming decades and
establish
measures to protect their status, as well as that of the land itself.

What we are searching for is a broad-based way of bringing stability and a
planned
continuity to the farming enterprise and the communities to which farmers
belong. Let's
ask questions about taxation for example and see how it might be more
effectively managed.
We'll find there are useful answers here - the key is a simple change to the
method of
taxation.

'ABDU'L-BAHA AND THE GOLDEN RULE

The way in which taxation could provide such a counterbalance originates in a
talk,[2]
entitled 'Cooperation', given by 'Abdu'l-Bahá[3] whilst on his historic and
extensive
travels to Europe and North America during the years 1911-1912. Throughout his
tour of
these nations 'Abdu'l-Bahá, for the first time before large audiences in the
West and in
the course of innumerable personal exchanges, presented the basic teachings and
modus operandi of the Faith[4] his Father, Bahá'u'lláh,[5] had founded some
fifty years previously.

The key words in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's talk were cooperation and reciprocity.

It seems his intention was to identify particularly relevant instances of where and how the Golden Rule:[6] "an ethic variously repeated in all the great religions",[7] might be applied to achieve a satisfactory and equitable organisation of human affairs in the 'here and now' - the world of today. He showed, as was his intention, that simple or single-step changes, rather than revolutionary multi-step changes, could transform and humanize the character of systems most of us assume, or have been led to believe, are anchored in the belief that the vagaries of market-driven economics must be allowed to determine outcomes.

Cooperation means working together for the common good and all of us can cite examples of where and how cooperation was applied (or should have been) in some situation.

Reciprocity is a concept, (long 'on hold') which should now be carefully re-examined and its implications re-explored. Reciprocity is the return, or mutual exchange, of some good or favour such as affection, an act of kindness or, in trade, some privilege or advantage such as a reduction in tariff. Roughly speaking it means 'you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours'. What we immediately sense is that the two, in combination, have untold potential for achieving a variety of goals important to humankind.

Purely reciprocating action (minus the human character of reciprocity and its spiritual connotations) abounds in day-to-day technology and nature. There is the internal combustion engine with pistons going up and down and the ubiquitous alternating current with voltage varying above and below zero. In the natural world we have the rise and fall of tides and the passage of solstices following each other "as night follows day". Perhaps we should, given this, more readily accept that periodic drought is part and parcel of the 'Australian environment'. Like it or not, bad seasons as well as good are our past, present and future, and remain the major influence on the rise and fall of fortunes.

Clearly this cycle needs to be considered when we seek to achieve a higher degree of stability in the affairs of individuals and communities. In combination with a variety of approaches, the taxation system could be arranged to allow tax to flow back and forth, in a controlled manner, in such a way that cooperation and reciprocity become the norm rather than the customary approaches.

A simple analogy is a central reservoir (or storehouse as termed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá) connected at suitable level to a series of smaller 'pools', associated with individual enterprises, the latter constituting the total monetary 'catchment'. When harvests are bountiful and markets opportune, incomes exceed outgoings and tax, or goods in kind, in certain cases flow positively to the storage reservoir under suitable control. The reservoir expands to accept this but in lean times, or in any or most cases where an individual's income fails for a variety of reasons to meet expenses, tax flows naturally and negatively to that pool. This ensures that the individual's pool doesn't 'dry up' and the farm or enterprise remains alive and ready (and conceivably in receipt of encouragement) to respond to opportunities presented by a following season.

Reflection suggests that this model has the potential to become an integral component of not only local but higher-order agricultural systems. What we should particularly note is that the simple proviso for tax (or stored surplus) to flow from the central store back to the individual has 'humanised' or 'spiritualised' the current one way process by defining or establishing an essential partnership between individual and community based on cooperation and reciprocity.

In such a system it seems reasonable that taxation, on average, could remain at much the same as the current level. The central reservoir certainly needs to be large enough to provide a satisfactory reserve. This might not be the case initially, so during good times the positive tax rate might need to be set at generally higher level. Another

concern is

where taxation changes direction when a farmer's position improves and tax flow would

switch from negative to positive. It may be that limited support should be continued to

ensure that such farmers achieve a sounder recovery.

Also, conceptually, the model could be extended to bring the tax base adjacent to the

individual; and this is certainly how it was envisaged by 'Abdu'l-Bahá. That is, the

reservoir with primary interface could be placed locally, in the township or village. This

would allow specialised and possibly varied local-to-individual controls, the major

feature of which would remain, as currently, a sliding taxation scale, which 'Abdu'l-Bahá

described in some detail together with illustrative parameters. Separate, independent

controls could then be applied to the flow between each local reserve and the national

reserve, and by extension, to and from any supra-national reserve which could evolve out

of current international credit agencies.

The model allows one to look more closely at the aspect of subsidies and implies that

these are, as such, a potential threat to long-term survival of the entire system and

should be managed with appropriate care. In operation, the average tax flow must be

positive, unless the central reserve develops its own sources. It can never in practice,

remain continuously negative for any locality or nation; neither should it be excessively

negative for any individual. Common sense suggests that the essential, overall feature of

agricultural production is that it should be value-adding. This may in fact prove to be

too narrow a view, but there should be a basic starting point or first assumption.

Another cooperative aspect might involve the building in of balances based on the

agronomic feasibility of agricultural practices for the area. For example, a loss

sustained in an attempt to grow wheat where rainfall is marginal might not be supported,

since these crops rarely succeed and soil may be exposed to the ravages of the wind. On the other hand, the trial of a feasible but novel crop might attract support, since this could lead to an increase in diversity of products and to greater security for everyone.

Nor does the model in any way prevent the "building in" of encouragement for practices which have both short and long term value for both individual and society. These may include an increase in on-farm fodder reserves and water storage and other necessarily first lines of defense and all-important measures to protect or reclaim the quality of the environment. Also, valid concerns of the wider community could find remedy by means of controls directed specifically (for example) to improve the welfare of animals or retire agriculture from areas where its practice is manifestly inappropriate. All these, and many other aspects mentioned above, clearly come within the missions of agencies for education, agricultural research and extension at all levels, from local through to supra-national.

The main idea is to implement a taxation system functioning with the deliberate intent of incorporating a safety net, from collective resources and out of a sense of mutual solidarity. This will effectively underpin the uncertainty and financial risk attaching to nearly all cycles of agricultural production. In such cycles, the individual farmer has little option but to lock into whatever the season presents - for example, the amount and timing of rain or incidence and severity of plant or animal disease. The community as a whole, recognising its vital stake in this process, cooperatively employs material means, and where necessary in relation to the individual reciprocates, helping ensure continuity of the livelihood of the farmer and the valuable and essential contributions of agriculture.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

'Abdu'l-Bahá was described by an astute observer as one "who will surely unite the East and the West: for He treads the mystic way with practical feet".[8] He was convinced that Europe would sink into war soon after his western journeys

and would refer
to the expected disaster and its aftermath of overt racial antagonism,
institutionalised
materialism and rampant nationalism with dread and heartfelt sadness. On return
to his
home in the Holy Land at almost seventy years of age he organised the growing
of grain at
various locations, some bordering the Sea of Galilee, and arranged for storage.
Throughout
the Great War, he dispensed grain in Akka and Haifa as conditions required.[9]
The
British Government, in acknowledgment of these and other numerous and
continuous
humanitarian services, offered him the honour of knighthood. This recognition
he
graciously accepted from the Military Governor of Haifa at a special conferring
ceremony
in April of 1920, the very month pioneers arrived to bring the Bahá'í Faith
to Australia
and the year before his passing. In all this, he did honour to his Father,
Bahá'u'lláh,
Who is known to Bahá'ís as "the true Joseph".[10]

Elsewhere 'Abdu'l-Bahá described the "struggle for existence" as humanity's
"greatest affliction" thereby identifying the philosophy of 'the devil take the
hindmost' as inhuman. He said that mankind, possessing the divine gifts of mind
and
intellect, is charged by its Creator to at all times use these for no other
purpose than
to build a true brotherhood of man. Should it remain careless however, and
wasteful of
these unique bestowals "of which all other created things are minus", and
circle
away from the straight pathway of quest for this goal, it must without recourse
and
repeatedly reap a barren harvest, 'fit for fire'. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's writings and
personal
example provide us with a great store of grist for the mill of true human
endeavour,
enough I should say, to carry us safely from this to the next divine
springtime, if we but
use it wisely. I should like to close this paper with a brief quotation from
'Abdu'l-Bahá
which I feel is particularly relevant:[11]

"The reason for God's having made Himself manifest, and for this shining forth
of
infinite lights from the realm of the invisible, is none other than the

training of all
men's souls and the refining of the characters of all on earth - so that
blessed
individuals, who have freed themselves from the murk of the animal world, shall
rise up
with those qualities which are the adornings of the reality of man."

Notes:

- 1) Dillon, J.L. 1995. Faculty of Agriculture Graduation Address, University of Sydney,
2nd June 1995 - delivered at the occasion of conferring on Professor Dillon of
the Degree
of Doctor of Agricultural Economics 'Honoris Causa'.
- 2) "Foundations of World Unity", 1955. Compiled from Addresses and Tablets of
'Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, Wilmette Illinois.
- 3) 'Abdu'l-Bahá (1844-1921) is the eldest of Bahá'u'lláh's children to
survive
infancy. He occupies a unique position in religious history having been
specifically
appointed in his Father's Will to interpret the meaning and application of his
Father's
Writings following the latter's passing.
- 4) The Bahá'í Faith has its origins in 1844 when its Herald, the Bab, or
'Gate'
(1819-1850) proclaimed Himself in Shiraz as the recipient of a new Revelation
from God and
the Forerunner of the Promised One of all ages - Who was soon to appear. The
Bahá'í
Faith has its World Centre in Haifa in Israel and is today established in over
220
countries and nations, second only to Christianity in spread and
representation. Its
membership world-wide numbers over five million.
- 5) Bahá'u'lláh (1817-1892) is the Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, His title
"signifying at once the glory, the light and the splendour of God" (see note
10). In 1863 in Baghdad, He announced Himself as the One promised by the Bab.
He had been
banished from His native land of Persia in 1852 and was eventually imprisoned
in 1868 in
Akka in Palestine in which vicinity lies His Shrine. His Writings - prayers,
tablets and
treatises concerning the basis of this Faith He as bidden by God had
established, its
laws, purpose, structure into the future and ultimate destiny - occupy, quite
literally,

'a hundred volumes'. As He Himself has assessed: "Through each and every one of the verses which the Pen of the Most High hath revealed, the doors of love and unity have been unlocked and flung open to the face of men".

6) The Golden Rule, for example - "love thy neighbour as thyself", or "do unto others as you would have them do unto you", or "choose for others that which you would choose for yourself".

7) "To The Peoples of the World - the Promise of World Peace", 1985, The Universal House of Justice - Bahá'í World Centre, Haifa.

8) Dr David Starr Jordan, President of the Leland Stanford Junior University at Palo Alto in California is reported as having made this remark (see Balyuzi 1971, below) on the occasion at his invitation, of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's address to the assembled campus, some 2000 strong, on 8th October 1912.

9) Balyuzi, H.M., 1971. "'Abdu'l-Bahá - a Biography", published by George Ronald of London.

10) Shoghi Effendi, 1944. "God Passes By". Bahá'í Publishing Trust, Wilmette Illinois.

11) "Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá", 1978, Compiled by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, Bahá'í World Centre, Haifa.

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