

Once upon a time there were some royal engineers in Houston, Texas. From their palace offices they designed equipment for oilfields all over the world. Most of the time, the equipment worked well, particularly in areas where the climate was much like that in the kingdom of southeast Texas. These aristocrats were frequently annoyed by one lowly peasant branch manager who made phone calls on a regular basis to complain about the flawed designs of the royal equipment.

According to the peasant manager, in the cold northern air the equipment did not function properly. The royal engineers grew weary of the criticism, phoned the peasant's supervisor, and cried, "This peasant is no engineer; he has no status to question the Royal Guild." After some discussions, the peasant manager and supervisor issued a formal invitation to the royal engineers to fly to the north country to validate their superior knowledge. But in secret the peasant manager called upon the Witch of January to wreak havoc while the aristocrats visited the outskirts of the kingdom.

The royal engineers embarked on the 2,000-mile journey to the north country during a month when the average minimum temperature was minus 41°F. They departed from Houston in their royal jet under warm, sunny skies and arrived midafternoon in Sidney, Mont., just as the sun was on its way to hide from the Witch of January. The royals rented their very own conveyance for the journey the next day, since they did not wish to be in the immediate company of peasants. The next morning they set out to view some of the superbly engineered equipment in action. Forty miles out of town on a frozen, washboard oilfield road, the royal carriage suddenly slid off the ice and into the borrow pit.

The peasants turned around to investigate and pulled alongside the compromised carriage. The four royal engineers were out surveying the predicament. The supervisor asked the peasant if they should assist the royalty, but the peasant said: "Let that gaggle of egos do it themselves. It's not our problem. Maybe they'll learn something."

The royal engineers worked while the peasants sat in their warm truck. After an hour or so, the Guild engineered a way out of the predicament and the journey recommenced as planned. Upon reaching the intended destination, the chill factor

## TALES FROM THE WASTELAND *Shepherd's Pie Anyone?*

*Imagining what life should be like.*

*By Barry Perryman, Ph.D.*

dropped to 80 below zero. The coats worn by the royals were not enough, but the peasant manager spurred them on in spite of their protests, and, as luck would have it, the equipment broke down as they first gazed upon it, just in the way the peasant had described.

The party returned to town with plans of another tour the following day, but during the night the royal engineers decided they

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had seen enough. They were cold, miserable, humiliated and desperate to return to the balmy weather of their kingdom. They were provoked that the peasant had shamed them in their failure to anticipate such problems. Fittingly, the aristocrats were unable to fly out the next morning. Their jet would not start because the engines were too cold, as there was no heated hangar at the airport. At noon the following day, the engines were started; however, all the royal whiskey bottles had frozen and busted, so the flight home was without the pleasure of spirits. "Served 'em right," the peasant said to the supervisor. "They don't wanna listen to anybody close to the problem. They sit around in an office 2,000 miles away and imagine what life should be like for us out here in the boonies."

The end.

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This little tale reminds me of a quote by the economic philosopher Henry George: "To prevent government from becoming corrupt and tyrannous, its organization and methods should be as simple as possible, its functions be restricted to those necessary to the common welfare, and in all its parts it should be kept as close to the people and as directly

within their control as may be." The point of emphasis is keep supervision or government as local as possible. When someone or some entity thousands of miles away has a fantastic idea about how those distant should behave or live, those distant are likely to suffer.

The sage-grouse drama that unfolded here in the West over the past 15 years illustrates the point well. A group of people from far away empowered a federal agency from farther away to impose servitude on those with the most direct and closest linkages to the land and resources. They ordered a paradigm shift in how public lands are managed, and by doing so imposed their wishful view of the universe using a network of complicated rules that even the most eminent, wisest, thoughtful minds could not alter.

None of the faraway people would listen to the best and brightest, none of their agents would be advised by the cadre of folks with the most knowledge and experience. In fact, the federal planning documents developed to manage sage-grouse habitat completely ignored and neglected a whole body of scientific literature that questioned the very ecology and structure of the imposed habitat standards. I have testified in federal District Court to that fact. The courts are now the only redress for those who speak for the land, and a complex litigation will play out in coming years.

Thinking about the whole 15-year sage-grouse odyssey, I am reminded of another quote by Alexis de Tocqueville that explains the situation in a larger context, and it is certainly germane to our next election cycle: "Society will develop a new kind of servitude which covers the surface of society with a network of complicated rules, through which the most original minds and the most energetic characters cannot penetrate. It does not tyrannize but it compresses, enervates, extinguishes, and stupefies a people, till each nation is reduced to nothing better than a flock of timid and industrious animals, of which the government is the shepherd."

Shepherd's pie anyone? ■

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