

## **Left behind – and I'm not enraptured**

Being in the middle of groups has a naturally comforting feel. Looking at the ubiquitous newspaper pie charts indicating public sentiment on everything from trade issues to toilet paper, we often are relieved when others agree with our opinion.

More frequently, however, I find myself tending to the margins – holding positions that are mildly out of the mainstream. On a few issues I seem to have wandered into the fringe. The manly response is to assert loudly that I don't care about the opinions of the masses; that I am an independent thinker. This is nonsense, of course – we all care about what others think.

This separation can occur not only when I adopt unpopular beliefs, but also when mass opinion shifts and I do not. In the realm of popular issues, I am less alarmed. I don't watch enough TV to keep up with rapidly shifting controversies. Howard Dean came and went before I really had formed a judgment, for example. The situations that perplex me are not spelled out in polls but corporate decisions or organizational policy signals.

For example, I have been a happy owner of a Case 2366 combine. It is the largest combine I have ever owned and its performance has been more than I hoped, notwithstanding the unloading auger-power pole incident which I now admit was not a design flaw. Its capacity is more than enough for our 1350 acres.

I was stunned to hear that CNH will not be continuing this machine size, only larger harvesters. To me it indicated I was no longer a target market for them. I do not fault their marketing, but all the charts and graphs about where farm size is going don't begin to have the impact of discovering your operation is too small to be of interest to long-term suppliers.

Nor am I whining about loyalty. I have to make reciprocal decisions to protect my own business viability as well. Nonetheless it is a sobering wakeup call to my self-serving view of the world to find that agriculture is moving on without me.

A similar incident occurred at the AFBF (Farm Bureau) meeting recently. It has been a singular privilege to have been active in Farm Bureau at numerous levels, and I have many valued friends in the organization. I am

fairly familiar with their policy from my days as a county president. One of these positions was a firm belief that free trade optimizes the outcome for all involved.

This changed in 2004. The AFBF delegate body approved a blatantly protectionist stance on selected commodities. Although the vote was razor-thin, the fact that any majority at all was assembled revealed to me how far from the pack I was. Of course this is just one issue, but added to other subtle shifts lately, I think we are “drifting apart”, to use modern relationship jargon.

Nor is it a direction I wish to go to in order to stay in the group. Loyalty to core beliefs is often more important than loyalty to groups or individuals. Farm Bureau shrewdly makes it difficult to register my disapproval by binding insurance policies to membership. Finding a new insurance agent when I really like the one I have is another hurdle altogether. So as far as the membership statistics the outside world sees, I remain another happy Farm Bureau member satisfied with policy decisions.

To be sure, I have the option of mounting a grass-roots campaign to reverse this decision, but frankly, I sense the weight of insurance customers moving in the opposite direction. My best use of time is probably to start pricing a new farm policy. Either way, I am obviously no longer in sync with much of my profession.

The latest jolt though, was President Bush’s 2005 budget. My position on the political chart has always been in the conservative Republican camp. This is where I thought the guy I voted for was anchored as well. But if planning more tax cuts in the face of \$500B deficits, erecting trade barriers for politically powerful industries, attacking sincere dissent as craven disloyalty are the beliefs of conservative Republicans today, then I must be something else. Maybe I’m a liberal...Republican. I’ve heard there may be as many as 6 or 7 of us.

Now all these perceptions could simply be fusty middle-aged crankiness. Perhaps I am just not well-informed or smart enough to understand my principles are outdated. Regardless, my painfully-acquired intellectual tools and moral compass are all that I have to guide my decisions.

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CNH, Farm Bureau, and the Republican Party are going where my conscience or circumstances prohibit. I suspect they won't miss me at all.

Nevertheless, I shall miss them.