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U.S. AG Secretary Says Rural Areas are "Irrelevant"

Solidarity America

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BC Columnist

When the nation's secretary of agriculture says that rural areas are "irrelevant," it's time to take a long look at how we treat people in the hinterlands and what that means for the food we are offered in our supermarkets.

In the past week, Secretary Tom Vilsack, the Obama Administration's point man in dealing with farm and food issues, told a gathering in Washington sponsored by the magazine *Farm Journal* that rural America is becoming "less and less relevant." He attributed that, to some degree, to the shrinking population of the countryside, with people moving to cities and suburbs.

It is a mass movement that has occurred over several decades, since family farmers and other rural people have moved, looking for work. There is a parallel in developing countries which have suffered from the urbanization of their populations. Along with that movement have come all the social and economic problems that are found there: not nearly enough jobs (but that means that people will work for very low wages), nowhere near enough decent housing that can be paid for by low-wage workers, increase in some kinds of crime, and other social disruptions. These conditions are especially hard on those who try to keep their families intact.

Vilsack knows that for decades, the warning to family farmers has been "get big or get out." Now we know that they meant it. The move to industrial agriculture at the expense of small farm agriculture has

been intentional and inexorable. The food system that has resulted is based not on food, but on "commodities." That is, much of what passes for food today is from the major commodities, corn, wheat, and soybeans. Literally, our "food scientists" can make these commodities taste like actual food. And they do it, not by growing the food in the soil, but in the laboratories.

Meantime, family farmers (and there is a growing number of them on very small farms) are growing food and developing ways to get that food to the eaters of the nation, in villages, suburbs, and in the big cities. Still, they make up only a small proportion of all that is purchased and eaten on a daily basis in the U.S. The proportion is growing every year, but it is still small.

There is a simple reason for the depopulation of rural America. The loss of small farm agriculture has had a deleterious effect on local economies. Small farms might have employed one or two hired hands at full time, but their generation of economic activity in their local communities is much greater than one would expect. Forty small farms in a rural town were the foundation of the local economy, not only for the workers they hired directly, but also for the implement dealers, parts stores, hardware stores, feed stores, schools, churches, and all of the other aspects of a healthy community. That's gone.

When 35 of those small farms are forced out, some of the land they occupied might be picked up by the remaining five farms, but not all of it. But the remaining farms are bigger and likely use much larger equipment and they don't have the need for as many workers. Generally then, the local economy declines. The reason for encouraging this kind of arrangement is "economy of scale," and this has been pushed over decades by many, including federal and state governments, giant agribusiness, and the land grant universities.

Such policies could have been written, and probably have been, by the giant agricultural conglomerates in Corporate America. We live in a time when a very few corporations control our supply of food, including dairy, meat, pork, poultry, as well as the various grains, which the food scientists turn into the products offered in supermarkets. It is not just the banking and financial systems that are controlled by monopolies; it is also the food we depend on for our daily sustenance.

The takeover of our food system by corporations has happened over some decades and largely out of sight of the American people, who have been very much urbanized or suburbanized since World War II.

They have tended to think about their lives in the cities or suburbs and very little of that has had anything to do with farming or agriculture. So, it has been a surprise to many to find out who controls food...and how few are those who do the controlling. There are still millions who haven't gotten the word, but they are learning.

An illustration of that learning process was the ballot initiative in California, Proposition 37. The bill that would have required foods containing any genetically modified components to be labeled as such. It was a fight between the people who wanted GMO labeling and the industry, which poured tens of millions of dollars into the campaign and defeated the proposition. Agribusiness outspent proponents 5-1 and the money came from some of the biggest corporations, in large amounts.

Rural America is producing commodities and food (fruits and vegetables) that are coming out of an industrial agricultural model. The emphasis is on chemical fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides, huge tracts of land (suitable for large machinery that is likely never fully paid for), monoculture, and cheap labor. Farm workers are at the bottom of the wage scale, unless they are young and can keep up a grueling piecework pace, which doesn't last for long in a working life.

The food so produced contains large amounts of corn, corn sugars, soy and soy products, and lots of salt. And, most of the corn and soy grown in the U.S. are genetically modified (GM), so it is hard to get food that does not contain such products. Companies like Monsanto, the chemical and seed giant, own patents on the GM seeds and that gives them overwhelming power in the marketplace of food and agriculture (cotton for cottonseed oil, canola for oil, and sugar beets also have been genetically modified), and attempts are made every year to introduce more plants that can be genetically manipulated and, thus, patented, so the big corporations gain more profits and greater control of our food and fiber.

While there is a debate on the issue of GM foods, the debate is still quite one-sided, with the advertising, public relations, and propaganda on the side of the agribusiness corporations. Even the press often derides supporters of GMO labeling as "hysterical" over the issue. The frantic behavior of the corporations who want to keep GMOs label-free is not termed hysteria. It should be noted that Vilsack, the former governor of Iowa, is a long-time proponent of GMO crops and foods.

The secretary in his speech to rural interests pointed out rural America's greatest assets: the food supply, recreation, and energy. While those may be assets for some to celebrate, there are problems. First, there is a struggle over the food supply and whether farmers or commodity growers using the industrial model will produce it. Second, recreation in rural areas is under threat by development, industrial agriculture, and by the third asset, energy. There is a frenzy to get the remaining oil and gas out of shale formations that occur in much of the U.S.

Giant "energy companies" see profits and tell farmers and forest owners that they are "sitting on a gold mine," that their land is atop vast oil and gas reserves. Getting it out of the ground is where the problems start. Horizontal hydrofracturing ("fracking") is the latest technology for doing so. In many states, across the country, people feel the damage has been done. There is contaminated water, toxic gases in the air, people near drilling pads and pipelines are sickened, and there is air pollution and disruption of community life. The drilling industry assures the people that they are not to blame, and that gas and oil are "clean" sources of energy. "Fracking" entails pumping millions of gallons of potable water, mixed with a secret chemical combination and sand, under high pressure, to break up the rock a mile or two below the surface, in order to release the gas or oil.

Citizens of fracked communities see things very differently. They see the complete disruption of their towns and villages and they see real danger to their health, the health of their families, to their friends and neighbors, and to the land and water. Their side of the story is getting out, but they are no match for the power and money of the "energy extraction" industry, whose advertisements show bucolic scenes of farms and small-town life in America.

Vilsack may be right about rural America no longer being relevant. In fact, it has been made irrelevant, just as so many of American cities have been made irrelevant and left to decay (think Detroit, the once great industrial city that was the fourth-largest in the U.S., and all of the smaller industrial cities in the "rust belt"). These things did not happen by accident. They have been the products of Corporate America's "industrial policy," which has been carried out by politicians, who have done the bidding not of the people, but of a small cadre of corporatists.

Cities may have been left stranded to try to survive on their own as a result of these corporate policies (cut and run to low-wage countries

for virtually every manufactured product), but the rural areas are still useful for some things and one of them is the exploitation of natural resources: mountaintop removal for coal, clear cutting of forests for toilet paper and paper towels, and destructive fracking for the oil and gas in the shale deposits around the country. These corporations and many politicians know this kind of extractive, unsustainable activity must come to an end at some time in the near future. It's either that, or the end of life as we know it on Planet Earth.

Politicians who know what is happening are too afraid to tell the American people that the way of life they have had since the end of World War II needs to change profoundly. Rather, they are pretending that the wasteful and unsustainable way of life will go on forever. It can't and it won't.

Until then, we can hear from various officials about the parts of the nation that are "irrelevant," which, of course, means that the people who live there are irrelevant. Those of us who have been designated "irrelevant" need to join together and start making the changes that need to be made.

As we saw in the November presidential election, the people can overcome the wealth and power of the few, when they vote intelligently in the interests of all. The people are the 98 percent and, in solidarity, they can accomplish much, even if someone thinks they don't matter.

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