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Mistrust and conspiracy theories

Herbicide spraying divides communities

Herbicides are among the hottest of hot-button issues in the rural West, with significant fights about chemical sprays used in industrial forestry, commercial shellfish production and agriculture.

Emotions and profit motivations both run high. These fights between fierce opponents and defenders of industry practices have huge political ramifications. Politicians don’t enjoy being stuck between sparring constituents. Usually, however, it’s easy to predict who will come out on top, based on campaign contributions and long-established connections between lawmakers and lobbyists. These factors don’t necessarily lead to decisions that are inherently “wrong,” but they do result in citizens feeling their concerns are given short shrift.

There is a fascinating case study in the Monday *Oregonian*, in which reporter Rob Davis does a good job exploring how southwest Oregon citizens who worry about forest spraying found their efforts at legislative reforms stymied by a process that favors economic interests. (See tinyurl.com/o67f5qr)

In a drama extensively covered by statewide news media in the past couple years, Curry County residents object to forest spraying that either negligently or accidentally also hits private homes and neighborhoods. Some took their case to the Oregon Legislature. They got a distinctly cold shoulder from their own representative, but managed to convince two Portland-area Democrats to sponsor a bill imposing no-spray buffers around homes and schools, public notice before spraying and company disclosure of what and where they spray.

All this seems perfectly reasonable. But it ended up suffering the pathetic three-quarters death that is the fate of much reform deemed inconvenient to those who grease the legislative process. The original bill sponsors were sidelined. Clatskanie Democrat Brad Witt then watered down what was left. Witt has received \$50,000 in contributions from forestry and chemical interests since 2008.

Even fervent and heartfelt worries are not always valid — witness misplaced anxiety over immunizations. But the role of money in state politics — both in the form of contributions and industry’s ability to staff full-time lobbying offices — is deeply corrosive to public trust.

Mistrust leads to conspiracy theories and feelings of powerlessness. In southwest Washington, for example, forest spraying is widely blamed for elk hoof-rot, despite a lack of evidence. Use of pesticides to control vegetation and mud shrimp in Willapa Bay is blowing up into a fight that’s getting national attention.

Some will choose to believe the most frightening theories irrespective of the facts, but ignoring their concerns only exacerbates the problem. Past reassurances about the safety of chemicals have often enough proven to be false that it’s no wonder there is skepticism.

Environmental regulators must be encouraged to pursue the truth wherever it leads. Politicians should stay out of the way of scientific inquiry and act in accordance with the facts. Industries should endeavor to be good neighbors, working to lessen their impacts on surroundings, rather than fighting to avoid changes in historic practices that may have outlived their time.

Japanese are prospecting for railway development. They are also venturing into India and Vietnam.

Some weeks ago U.S. officials were rattled at the news that China’s nascent international development bank was seeking to supplant the International Monetary Fund, a crown jewel of the postwar era, based in the U.S. It seems that American banking will in some small way participate in China’s banking venture. While discussing this news, the economist Fareed Zakaria said on CNN that perhaps the Chinese could supply the capital to fix America’s roads and bridges, because Congress won’t pay for it.

President Lincoln’s transcontinental railway moved through Congress, because the Southern states had left the Union. Like the Morrill Act creating land grant universities, the railway act was part of a bundle of progressive, nation-building laws Southern congressmen and senators had blocked.

Today the Republican Party’s bedrock lies in the South, and its default response to large national needs is “no.”

The nation can’t wait on congressional ideologues who are blind to aspects of America that are akin to the Third World. A Japanese bullet train sounds like a pretty good option for our dense population corridors.

OPINION

Europe’s Google problem

By JOE NOCERA
New York Times News Service



Joe Nocera

Internet platforms — or, at the least, clip the wings of the big U.S. Internet companies while there’s still time.

I bring this up in the wake of the decision by Margrethe Vestager, the European Union’s relatively new (she took office in November) commissioner in charge of competition policy, to bring antitrust charges against Google, the culmination of a five-year investigation. The case revolves around whether Google took advantage of its dominance in search to favor its own comparison-shopping service over those of its rivals. Vestager also opened an inquiry into Google’s Android mobile operating system and said the European Union would investigate other potential violations if need be.

Not long after announcing the charges, Vestager made a speech in Washington.

“We have no grudge; we have no fight with Google,” she said. “In all our cases, we are indifferent to the nationality of the companies involved.

Our responsibility is to make sure that any company with operations in the territory of the EU complies with our treaty rules.”

Well, maybe. But it is also true that, to an unusual degree, this investigation, especially in its latter stages, has been driven by politics. The political rhetoric around Google in Europe has been so heated that, had Vestager decided not to bring a case, her political standing might have been weakened, “probably compromising her ability to pursue effectively other high-profile antitrust cases,” wrote Carlos Kirjner, an analyst with Sanford C. Bernstein & Co.

Consider, for instance, what happened last year when Google was close to settling the case with Vestager’s predecessor, Joaquín Almunia. Google had agreed to make

changes that it found cumbersome and intrusive, but it wanted to get the case behind it and move on. Instead, European politicians, especially in France and Germany, and prodded by Google’s competitors, complained that Almunia was being too accommodating to the company.

“The offers by Google aren’t worthless, but they’re not nearly enough,” one such politician, Guenther Oettinger of Germany, told *The Wall Street Journal*.

At the time, Oettinger was serving as the European Union’s energy commissioner, making him one of the 28 commissioners who would have to approve any settlement. By September, he had been nominated for a new job: commissioner for digital economy and society. At a hearing before a European Parliament committee, he took credit for blowing up the Google settlement.

As the digital commissioner, Oettinger has continued to advocate for what has become the German position on Google — namely that Google’s power must be reined in. In a speech two weeks ago, he essentially said that Europe should begin regulating Internet platforms in such a way as to allow homegrown companies to overtake the U.S. Internet giants. And last week, a document leaked from his office to *The Wall Street Journal* that outlined just such a plan, claiming that if nothing was done, the entire economy of Europe was “at risk” because of its dependency on U.S. Internet companies. There have even been calls in Europe to break up Google.

Europe has every right to regulate any company and any sector it wants. And it can bring antitrust charges as it sees fit. But given the rhetoric surrounding Google and the other U.S. Internet giants, suspicion of Europe’s real motives is justified.

From here, the European charges against Google look a lot like protectionism.

The French fear ... the imposition of U.S. culture.

At some point in my childhood, just before my teens, I was struck by the fact that almost all of the songs that I was hearing on the radio, half-consciously humming along to or committing to memory were about love.

Different shades of love, yes, and different stages of it: the heat and hunger of its infancy, the expansive warmth of its maturity, the bleeding pain when all that’s left of it is shards.

But love nonetheless.

Starland Vocal Band mulled the naughty pleasures of an *Afternoon Delight*. Daryl Hall pined for the sweet validation of a sweetheart’s gesture in *Sara Smile*. *Don’t Go Breaking My Heart*, Elton John implored Kiki Dee, and back then he hadn’t informed the world, or fully accepted, that the people most likely to hold that kind of power over him didn’t have names like Kiki.

Those were all huge hits in 1976, which is when I turned 12. And the No. 1 single that year?

Silly Love Songs, which Paul McCartney thought that “people would have had enough of.” No way, because there’s nothing silly about love, and when it comes to music, love is almost all there is.

When it comes to life, too.

On Tuesday love went to the Supreme Court, where the lawyers and the justices spoke of “equal participation” and “equal protection,” of “due process” and “animus,” of the Constitution and states’ rights.

There were legal terms and points of reference aplenty. It’s easy to become lost in them, and just as easy to follow the leads of journalists who are framing the proceedings as a high drama starring enigmatic actors: Justice Anthony Kennedy with his swing vote, Chief Justice John Roberts with his sensitivity to the court’s legacy.

But it’s important to step back and remember what this is really about: the most exquisite emotion that any of us can have, the most exalted bond, and whether we’re content to tell one group of Americans that their love is



AP Photo/Cliff Owen

Plaintiffs Rev. Maurice Blanchard, third from left, and his husband Dominique James, center, of Louisville, Ky., and attorney Laura Landenwich with Justice Kentucky, second from right, join other plaintiffs and legal attorneys celebrate in front of the Supreme Court after exiting the court following arguments in Washington, Tuesday. The opponents of same-sex marriage are urging the court to resist embracing what they see as a radical change in society's view of what constitutes marriage.

less dignified — and less worthy of celebration — than another group’s.

There’s no alternate message for gays and lesbians to read into prohibitions against same-sex marriage, because our society, like so many others, decided long ago that marriage was the most formal recognition of love, the ultimate blessing bestowed on it.

For many years now the tireless, dauntless advocates who blazed the trail to Tuesday have eloquently detailed the practical reasons for legalizing same-sex marriage, the measurable rights that it establishes or ensures.

It eliminates anxieties and injustices regarding hospital visits, medical decisions, estates, Social Security benefits, child custody, child care, immigration and more. It’s the best way to replace limbo with stability, freeing good people to get on with the rest of their lives.

But the expansion of marriage to include gays and lesbians does something even broader and deeper than that. It alters the very soundtrack of our existences, removing a refrain of disapproval, however minor, however muted.

I long detected that refrain in all of those silly love songs, which dominated the pop charts of my youth and dominate the pop charts now, because they traced a landscape that I would almost certainly have to tiptoe across, that was only partly hospitable to the likes of me.

So while they filled me with longing, as they were meant to, they also filled me with an unintended sadness. With envy, too, because I knew that for other people — straight people — worry and shame didn’t intrude on the melodies.

So much has changed. One of the most widely played love songs of last year, *Stay With Me*, is performed by Sam Smith, whose fans are fully aware that he’s gay. They’re aware, too, that the “one-night stand” that he mentions in the opening line is with another man.

At a music festival later this year, he’s scheduled to appear with Elton John, now out of the closet, now knighted and now with kids and a husband, whom he married under British law, which allows it.

U.S. law remains a patchwork: equality in this state, inequality in that one. That’s where the Supreme Court comes in.

It can endorse inconsistency. Or the justices can do what’s right and what’s necessary, acknowledging that there’s no way to divorce a person’s way of loving from his or her humanity — that they’re entwined, like verse and chorus, and to treat one as inferior is to treat both that way.

We’ll probably get a ruling in June.

And with any luck, that judgment will turn all the love songs of yesterday, today and tomorrow into universal anthems that make the same promise to every listener, no matter the object of his or her affection.

U.S. looks abroad for rail solutions

Of the transcontinental railroad built in the 1860s it was said: The railroad was built on Indian lands with British capital and Irish and Chinese labor. That line from Council Bluffs, Iowa, to Sacramento, Calif., was a major accomplishment of the Lincoln administration.

Now America is eyeing foreign technology and capital to bring our nation into the modern era of rail transport. *The Wall Street Journal* reported Monday that Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is touting his country’s bullet trains during a state visit to America.

The three routes beckoning the Japanese bid are San Francisco to Los Angeles, New York to Washington, D.C., and Houston to Dallas. The Journal reported that Chinese and European train manufacturers also will vie for American contracts.

This news is bittersweet. It is one more indicator that American manufacturing long ago forfeited an opportunity. On the other hand, at least our most populated regions are doing a smart thing by looking at proven train systems. The Amtrak Cascades train that does the Seattle-Eugene route uses a TALGO train whose base is Italy, a nation renowned for railway engineering.

America is not the only nation the