

## AN ATTEMPT TO REDEFINE PUBLIC INTEREST AND THE BIO-ENVIRONMENT

### Professor Rusen Keles

Director of Environmental Studies  
Faculty of Political Science, Ankara University  
Turkey

The title of this paper gives the impression that there exists a clear cut definition of the concept of public interest. That is not true at all. The concept of public interest is one of the most unclear, and illusive, concepts in political science and philosophy. It is perceived, basically, in two different senses.

First, in its legal and somewhat narrower sense, it is used as a yard stick for determining the boundaries of the right of ownership and the justification of state intervention directed to that right. Thus, it provides an operational principal used to distinguish between the respective rights of the community and the nation, from those of the citizens. On occasion, it considers the interests of the most populous groups in society but sometimes it is defined qualitatively, instead of in quantitative terms. Sometimes, it is regarded more than the rights of individuals. Secondly, in its political-ideological, and broader sense, this concept is related to the goals of the societal system, formed by individuals, instead of the individuals themselves. In this sense, providing social justice becomes a mission of the concept. It can neither be reduced to social classes (to the interests of certain groups or to certain individuals), nor can it be regarded as the sum of private interests. Within this framework, it happens to coincide with other concepts, such as social justice and societal interests. There is as much trouble with the term public interest, itself, as with the relevant authority to judge whether a certain course of action is, or is not, in the public interest.

Everyone in society, representatives of local and central governments and civil society organisations, tend to consider themselves authorised to interpret the term although, its contents, scope, and boundaries change from one culture to another. Over time, to interpret the concept of public interest, respective authorities will have to appear in constitutions and laws, in accordance with the principles of the law. Regardless of the ambiguity of this term, public interest became more and more important as the gradual deterioration of national resources, degradation of biocentric values, and violation of the rights of societies have become of world-wide concern. Within national boundaries environmental issues have to be considered within the context of this term since the environmental problems caused by particular groups in order to maximise their own profits and interests, have to be confronted and solved by public institutions, in co-operation with the citizens themselves. When it comes to a broader understanding, taking the global consequences into account, the new concept of public, beyond the legal entities called nation and national states, also needs to be defined.

Very few industries, businesses, or manufacturers include pollution prevention among their objectives. Nevertheless, production, services, consumption, transportation, construction and other activities, which are the basic factors of a high standard of living, create waste that inevitably results in the degradation of the environment. The axiom "I produce, therefore I pollute," unfortunately still applies to many aspects of human activity.

Despite these realistic observations, there is an increasing concern among business leaders to act consciously enough to comply with their responsibilities towards the bio-environment, in many parts of the world. Their concern has various sources and some entrepreneurs and enterprises, have attempted to include environmental dimensions in their productive activities. They perform analyses as to the likely benefits of modifying their conduct to adapt themselves to new regulations, both for rationalising their costs and for improving their productivity. Other enterprises owe their own birth and existence to progress in the environmental field. An environmentally-conscious market is rapidly growing all over the world. Therefore, many companies specialise in pollution control, waste-treatment, consultation, communication or the production of "green products." These products are either new or the result of alterations on old goods and services. For some companies, however, environmentally-friendly behaviour is merely some kind of "fashion," aimed at enabling them to send environmental messages to their clients.

Whatever the reasons may be, the business world is showing signs of increasing concern for the protection of the bio-environment. According to a survey carried out by a French research institute in 1989, for 32% of the business leaders interviewed, protection of the environment is a priority objective and, for 60%, even though not a priority, it is still a very important goal. No one admitted that it was unimportant. Furthermore, 85% felt the need to be mobilised to do something regarding the environment and 57% believed they had some responsibility towards the environment (Vatimbella, A. [1992] *Le Capitalism Vert*. Syros-Alternatives, Paris).

It is clear that a "green capitalism" is rapidly emerging. There are however, as many signs for being optimistic as pessimistic. Profit maximisation and the degradation of environmental values both belong to humanity. The adverse consequences of globalisation and privatisation with a priori considerations dictate us to behave more responsibly. The concepts of autonomy and freedom have to be carefully distinguished from selfishness. Solidarity among members of the same society, among nations, neighbouring countries and between present

and future generations must constitute an integral component of a new public interest concept. The scope of the word, "public," in the concept of public interest has to be enlarged as much as possible. Since ethical values are considerably integrated with public interest, the question, of "profit for whom," has to be continuously asked. It seems that in the 21st century, "business is business" will have to be changed into "business is no longer simply business." Finally, one must not forget that public interest in its broadest sense can only be protected by effective legal systems and institutions, at national as well as international levels. Moral and legal sanctions have to complete each other in order to guarantee the survival of fundamental biocentric values.

---

**Professor Rusen Keles** is Director of Environmental Studies on the Faculty of Political Science at Ankara University. He has served as President of the United Nations Association of Turkey and, in addition to providing advisory services to local government agencies, he has also been a consultant to the Council of Europe and the United Nations. Recipient of the Abdi Ipekci Prize for Peace and Friendship, he has published more than 30 books and reports and is a member of a number of national and international organisations, including B.I.O. trustee