

The Washington Times

Will green policies start a new worldwide famine?

By Richard W. Rahn

July 18, 2022

Look toward Sri Lanka and the Netherlands

OPINION:

Last week, there was a revolt against the government of Sri Lanka, where the president was forced to flee the country. During the past half century, Sri Lanka became a global success story — from a poor country to a middle-income country with a very high literacy rate. In part, this success was a result of embracing the agricultural policies of Norman Borlaug, the American agronomist, who was instrumental in developing and promoting high-yield agriculture, which ended famines that were not created by corrupt and incompetent governments.

High-yield agriculture involves the proper use of chemical fertilizers and genetically modified seeds that are more disease resistant and greatly increase food production per acre. The World Economic Forum and members of the global elite, along with so-called eco-friendly and self-serving corporations like Google, Disney and JPMorgan, urged Sri Lanka to become a “net zero” nation. The government bought into the nonsense, banning the import of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, which were used by 90% of the farmers, to encourage “organic farming.” The result was predictable — rice production dropped by 43%, and other important crops like tea and rubber were also seriously undermined in the rush to go organic. The U.N. has reported that more than three-quarters of the population have reduced their consumption of food due to shortages.

Over the last 30 years, most of the world’s population has moved out of poverty due to low-cost energy and cheap food. Inexpensive food necessitates low-cost fossil fuels to serve as feedstocks for fertilizer and to fuel farm machinery, crop storage and transportation. The increase in agricultural productivity was nothing short of amazing. One hundred and fifty years ago, the average farmer in the U.S. produced enough to feed three people; by the 1950s, that number had increased to about 75 people; by 2016, one farmer could feed 164 people; and now, some high-tech farmers feed twice that many.

But the global and government bureaucratic elite neither understand nor care about the cost of food and energy. They still receive their salaries, which are usually adjusted for the inflation they caused, and other perks, including paid for travel. The great famines of the last 100 years have all

been in authoritarian or socialist countries — like Ukraine, Russia, China, North Korea and several African countries, where the governments killed property rights and free markets. Nobel laureate Amartya Sen said it best: “In the terrible history of famines around the world, no substantial famine has ever occurred in any independent and democratic country with a relatively free press.”

Adam Smith (1723-1790), the founder of modern economics and a leading figure of the Enlightenment, and many of his followers were optimists. They believed economic well-being and governance would steadily improve. And then along came Thomas Robert Malthus (1766-1834) and his friend, the great economist David Ricardo (1772-1823), with a much more pessimistic view. Malthus was an economist, theologian and philosopher who argued that the population would grow faster than the food supply, thus putting endless downward pressure on wages, as well as leading to periodic famines. He had a static view of the world, where only small improvements in productivity were possible. Many of the current crop of greenies are latter-day Malthusians — only seeing limits to growth and hence the need for more population control. (In chapter three of his book, “The Making of Modern Economics,” Mark Skousen has one of the clearest descriptions of the arguments and key players in the limits-of-growth debates during the past two centuries — which I recommend for those who are interested in the topic.)

Dutch farmers and others are now in widespread protest against so-called green policies that will destroy their ability to produce many foods. The bureaucrats who devise these policies are often ignorant about how food is produced, the effects of production limitations on prices, and the impact on lower-income people.

The irony was that just as Malthus was presenting his arguments, the Industrial Revolution was underway. The steam engine — which was being commercialized — could power boats and trains, freeing man and animals from physical drudgery. Food could be shipped much greater distances without spoiling, thus allowing for more productive specialization in agriculture. Cyrus McCormick developed the mechanical reaper in the 1830s, leading him and his competitors to develop many other agricultural machines, greatly increasing the productivity.

Robotic farm machinery is now being developed (and some of it is in use) that will enable farmers to prepare and harvest their fields without having to leave their homes or offices. The widespread use of chemical fertilizers and the genetic revolution is less than a century old. And scientists who have expertise in the field argue the potential is almost unlimited to produce healthier and more abundant food.

This past Thursday, the nation and I personally as a friend lost a preeminent environmental scientist, Pat Michaels. Michaels was not “woke,” but an empiricist. His conclusions and recommendations were based on solid science and not on the political fashion of the moment, which often led him into conflict with those with less scientific integrity. He had been a professor of environmental sciences at the University of Virginia for 30 years and the recipient of many well-deserved awards. He also had been a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and the Competitive Enterprise Institute. Michaels was one of those who warned that the corruption of science could lead to serious food shortages. So unnecessary.