

From the Kitchen

12 October 2011



Do you own you? You may live your life on the basis that you are a free agent, that you own your body and that you control your mind. You may assume that, as long as you obey all the laws and treat others properly, you can do what you want. To a large extent this is so, but not entirely.

Our society is increasingly being controlled by those with vested interests in commercial enterprise. Those with businesses to protect and promote put increasing pressure on governments to make it easier for them to create wealth. This facilitation of commerce increasingly impinges on all our lives and our freedoms. An example can be found in the control over land use granted by governments to mining companies, to the extent that landowners may lose the effective use of their property for agriculture or simple quiet enjoyment.

In this country, you need a license to run a bank and these licenses are not easily granted. Therefore, there are relatively few banks. If you needed a license to open a dog-grooming parlour, it would have almost no impact on the lives of most of us; there may a restricted number of places to which you can take your dog for grooming, but not everyone owns a dog and not everyone who does would want or need to make use of the services of a dog groomer. But can you organise your life in such a way that you can avoid using a bank? It would be extremely difficult.

As I pointed out in an earlier post, money is a phantom in which we all believe. It is no more than a means to an end: the exchange of goods, services and labour. This phantom is controlled by a small number of businesses. Most of us have our wages or pensions or other income paid directly into our bank accounts. To use that money we have to either withdraw it or use a plastic card (another phantom). To use *our* money (if we can call it ours) we are charged fees by the bank. We may be charged fees for depositing or withdrawing money, for writing cheques and for using our plastic cards. Meanwhile, the banks are adept at increasing their profit each year – their *growth* in profits is typically more than 20% per year.

If you are paid for something with a cheque, after you have deposited it into your bank account, you have to wait three to five working days before you can use the money represented by the cheque. However, the person who paid you by cheque will have the value deducted from their account on the day you make the deposit. The bank has the use of that amount of money for investment purposes for those three to five days, at no cost to the bank.

I am not pointing this out as an attack on banks. I do so to show that something as basic to our modern way of life as the flow of money is controlled to a large extent by a small number of businesses. You have little control over one very important aspect of your life.

Your lack of control over money may also be evident when you want to borrow some. The banks control the extent of risk they wish to take, which means that those most in need of borrowed money may find it hardest to gain access to it.

Another area over which you may have less control than you realise or would wish, is that of access to ‘medicines’. I use that term broadly to include nutritional supplements, herbal and homoeopathic remedies, etc.

Firstly, I want to make it clear that there is good sense in having some restrictions on the availability and use of potentially dangerous substances. To this end, there are drugs which may only be used on the say-so of a doctor, someone who is trained in their use and understands the possible side-effects associated with them.

The use of pharmaceutical drugs generally, however, is controlled by the pharmaceutical industry; it is in their best interest that you use more expensive drugs which are protected by patent than equivalent, cheaper drugs whose patents have expired. The pharmaceutical industry spends billions of dollars each year to put pressure on governments, doctors and us (a lot of it through advertising) to use the more expensive drugs.

You may choose to avoid using pharmaceutical drugs, but you may find that to take that path, you have to fight for your rights. There is inordinate pressure from that industry to make it difficult for people to obtain non-pharmaceutical remedies. One way this is achieved is to ensure that government subsidy for medicines (in Australia through the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme – the PBS) is limited to pharmaceutical drugs. Although there are a number of non-pharmaceuticals that are cheaper than and as effective as patented pharmaceuticals, for treating particular conditions, they are not available through the PBS. It is not a case of a lack of good, peer-reviewed, published evidence. The committees which decide what is to be subsidised are strongly influenced by the pharmaceutical industry – those committees increasingly include people who were recently employed in the industry and still have strong connections with it.

A different area involving control or lack of it, which I will explore more fully later, is that of ageing and dying. There is pressure on old people and their families to use expensive medicine (drugs, equipment, hospital facilities) to stay alive at all costs. What is happening to the right of the individual to decide their path at the end of life? This is but one example of the over-medicalisation of our lives.