



**THE ECONOMIC PAMPHLETEER**  
**JOHN IKERD**

**Common sense in a time of uncertainty**

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We are in a time of change, but not the kind of change that is constant in life. Some might call it a time of crisis, when our decisions today will fundamentally reshape the future, for better or worse. Others might say we are “living in interesting times,” a phrase claimed to be a Chinese curse by a 19<sup>th</sup>-century English diplomat. A more accurate description might be a time of unpredictable uncertainty when it is impossible even to estimate the probability of what might happen next.

Many in the sustainable/local food movement have suffered “economic whiplash” from changes in the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)’s farm and food policies from one administration to the next (Held, 2025). Support for industrial com-

modity producers has been consistent across administrations. However, support for organic farming, farming by minorities and women, local foods, environmental protection, and food assistance programs has shifted dramatically with each change in administration. Programs addressing climate change and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) were hallmarks of changes during the Biden administration. The new Trump administration has promised to eliminate all programs related to climate change and DEI programs, including those administered by the USDA.

By executive orders, “Hundreds of thousands of lawful, signed, active contracts and grants—supporting critical conservation payments, farmer

John Ikerd is professor emeritus of agricultural economics, University of Missouri, Columbia. He was raised on a small farm and received his B.S., M.S., and Ph.D. degrees from the University of Missouri. He worked in the private industry prior to his 30-year academic career at North Carolina State University, Oklahoma State University, the University of Georgia, and the University of Missouri. Since retiring in 2000, he spends most of his time writing and speaking on issues of sustainability. Ikerd is author of six books and numerous professional papers, which are available at <http://johnikerd.com> and <https://ikerdj.mufaculty.umssystem.edu>.

Why an Economic Pamphleteer? In his historic pamphlet *Common Sense*, written in 1775–1776, Thomas Paine wrote of the necessity of people to form governments to moderate their individual self-interest. In our government today, the pursuit of economic self-interest reigns supreme. Rural America has been recolonized, economically, by corporate industrial agriculture. I hope my “pamphlets” will help awaken Americans to a new revolution—to create a sustainable agri-food economy, revitalize rural communities, and reclaim our democracy. The collected Economic Pamphleteer columns (2010–2017) are available at <https://bit.ly/ikerd-collection>

technical assistance, sustainable agriculture research, market infrastructure, and so much more, and representing billions of dollars in federal funding—are frozen, which threatens farms, jobs, and livelihoods in communities nationwide” (National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, 2025, para. 1). At the time of this writing in March 2025, the USDA has just cut two programs that have spent over US\$1 billion annually to help schools and food banks buy food from local farmers and ranchers (Brooks, 2025). With the previous administration, such programs were a priority; with the current administration, they are a waste of taxpayers’ money. Who knows how many, if any, of the commitments made by the previous administration will be reinstated? How can farmers and nonprofit organizations anticipate or plan for whatever might come next?

Each administration claims to have a mandate from the people to pursue its political agenda. Regardless of the validity of such claims, there are distinct differences of opinion regarding what the government should and should not do, what is good or bad, and even what is true or false. People have different life experiences and thus have different perspectives of reality, such as the causes of climate change and how much we should help those unable to help themselves. However, many of today’s conflicting political claims cannot be reconciled as different values or perspectives of the same reality. Some of our leaders are trying to represent their constituents, while others are trying to make government work for themselves. Some of our leaders and *influencers* are telling the truth, and others are lying.

It is impossible to reach a consensus regarding what the government should or should not do without a public consensus that distinguishes private gain from public service and lies from truth. The future of farm and food policy, and thus the future of the sustainable/local food movement, is unforeseeably uncertain in today’s cultural and political environment. So how can we cope with this kind of uncertainty? I contend there is no bet-

ter way than to start by returning to things we know are true, or *first principles*. Truth cannot conflict with truth; thus, fallacies will be revealed as conflicts with truth.

How do we know what is true? I have found no better test of truth than our *common sense*, or universal consensus of what is true. Nineteenth-century philosopher Thomas Reid wrote, “All knowledge and science must be built upon principles that are self-evident; and of such principles, every man who has *common sense* is competent to judge [emphasis added]” (Reid, 1863/1994, p. 422). First principles provide a logical starting point; without a starting point, all reasoning is circular. For example, the first principles of algebra, called axioms, provide the foundation for all mathematical proofs. One axiom is *a* times *b* equals *b* times *a*; for example,  $4 \times 3 = 3 \times 4$ . All mathematical proofs depend on axioms such as this that can not be proven but are generally accepted as truth. That is the nature of first principles.

The philosophy of common sense arose in the 18<sup>th</sup> century in response to the *doctrine of ideas*, which John Locke had adopted from earlier work by Descartes. Georgy Berkeley’s related theory of *pure idealism* attempted to explain the existence of physical or tangible reality solely in terms of ideas (Scottish common sense realism, 2025). David Hume argued that all ideas arise from experiences of reality, and thus there can be no mind to create ideas without physical reality (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2001/2023). This left 18<sup>th</sup>-century philosophers without a consensus regarding the existence of mental ideas or physical reality. Reid responded that ideas and the mind exist simply because people know both exist.

Reid reasoned that if the existence of the mind or reality can not be proven, it is not because they do not exist or are unknowable. He claimed that reality is ultimately grounded in the human consciousness of reality, which neither needs to be proven nor is capable of proof because it is the ground of all proofs. Other Scottish philosophers

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added refinements dealing with common human knowledge of morality as well as reality. The American Founding Father Thomas Jefferson wrote, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights ...” (National Archives, n.d.). The internal or inner sense of first principles is common to all people, is universal, and can be used to test the truth of knowledge and the morality of actions.

The philosophy of common sense is not a rejection of science because all science is ultimately rooted in common sense.

Thomas Huxley, an English botanist and anthropologist, wrote, “All truth, in the long run, is only common sense clarified” (Sherin, 2006, p. 535). Albert Einstein’s popular quotation, “Common sense is nothing more than a deposit of prejudices laid down in the mind before you reach eighteen” (Ratcliffe, 2017, para. 22), refers to *conventional wisdom*, which is not universal but is linked to specific cultures and places. He also said, “The whole of science is nothing more than a refinement of everyday thinking” (Yaffe, 2013, p. 2). Science can be used to clarify and refine our common sense but cannot replace it as a starting point. Even in times of uncertainty, we can rely on our common sense of the first principles of truth and morality.

I suggest that thoughtful people, regardless of their ethnic, religious, or political belief systems, agree that positive human relationships depend on core values such as honesty, fairness, responsibility, empathy, compassion, and respect. Different individuals and cultures might add a few values to this list. However, I doubt many, if any, would be willing to trust someone to tell the truth who has a history of being dishonest, unfair, and irresponsible. Neither would they trust someone who lacks empathy, compassion, and respect to act in ways that benefit others rather than themselves. Claims that societies can benefit from being led or repre-

mented by people who are dishonest, unfair, irresponsible, self-centered, indifferent, and disrespectful conflict with our common sense of reality and thus cannot be accepted as truth.

There are also principles of nature that are generally understood and accepted as truths. Healthy living organisms and ecosystems are diverse, interdependent, individualistic, and dynamic. Interdependent or mutually beneficial relationships among their diverse elements or parts allow living organisms and ecosystems to renew, regenerate, and evolve from generation to generation. Individ-

ual organisms are unique and continually changing, and natural ecosystems are site-specific and ever-evolving. Claims that living systems—including human organizations, governments, and societies—can be managed as specialized, standardized, mechanized, digitized, centrally controlled mechanisms or algorithms conflict with our common sense of reality and thus cannot be accepted as truth.

Finally, the core principles of economics reflect our nature as self-seeking, individual human beings. The economy

responds to scarcity, rather than need. Scarcity means there is not enough for everyone to have all they need or want. Some may have too little because others have too much, but the economy is indifferent to their suffering (Ikerd, n.d.). The economy prioritizes efficiency over equity and justice to maximize economic benefits relative to costs. The economy values individual sovereignty or independence over cooperation, collaboration, or stewardship of nature or society. Claims that social equity and justice or resource conservation and environmental protection can be secured by privatizing and commodifying the essential functions of government conflict with our common sense of reality and thus cannot be accepted as truth.

During these times of uncertainty, the sustainable/local food movement can provide steadfast

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examples of organizations and communities guided by truth and goodness rather than lies and meanness. They can refuse to be gullible victims of liars and bullies and still be trustworthy and caring in their relationships, both within and outside their communities of interest. They can confront lies with truth and meanness with goodness. They can fight for social and environmental equity and justice while caring for the less fortunate in their communities and defending and protecting the resources entrusted to them. They can confront blind faith in competition as the key to success with the common sense that has led humans throughout history to form communities and societies—to cooperate for survival and a good quality of life (Ikerd, 2014). They can resist efforts to privatize essential public services at state and national levels while working to ensure

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that the local economy functions within the bounds of an equitable and just community.

Reality will ultimately separate truth from lies and meanness from goodness. Those lying or guided by the egotism of meanness and lies will bear the costs, and those guided by the common sense of goodness and truth will reap the rewards. There is no way of knowing how long it will take for this truth to be revealed and rewarded at the national, societal, or global levels. However, the rewards of acting on our common sense are immediate. Our common sense tells us that the quality of our lives depends on the quality of our relationships and sense of purpose and meaning in life, as well as our ability to meet our economic necessities. And our lives are made better when we can help each other meet the necessities of life. These times of uncertainty should remind us to remain true to our common sense of goodness and truth. 

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