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"Re-framing Flood Control in England and Wales"

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Traditionally floods have been understood to be acts of God or nature, with localised impacts afflicting those who choose to live or to invest capital in lowland and coastal locations. This central idea of causation, located outside human agency, survives somewhat precariously today, but is reflected in the lack of any right to protection from flooding in England and Wales. However in 1930 new legislation institutionalised a social framing of the impact of floods as part of a wider national problem. This related the interests of lowland agriculture and land drainage to the national economic and military interest. Modernising and expanding agricultural production was a political priority from the 1930s to the 1980s. The cost of preventing flooding and draining land was transferred from the affected landowners to the nation as a whole. River and coastal engineering was central to the new policy, and by the early 1970s much of the riverine and coastal environment was radically altered by flood defence structures and associated land drainage. As a result of food over-production and conflicts with conservation interests in the early 1980s, the emphasis has shifted from drainage to flood defence, while risk reduction and environmentalist values have also been promoted. The institutional arrangements from 1930 largely survive, however, and a new coherent social framing has failed to emerge. It is argued that for a risk-oriented framing to succeed, new assumptions about causation and a new ethical outlook are now needed. Emphasis on flood "control" rather than "defence," and a shift in priorities from economic benefits towards human rights and intrinsic value in nature are proposed as key elements in such a re-framing.
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