

Why be astonished?

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Dennis Howlett wrote the [following](#) on his blog yesterday:

Voyages-SNCF is of interest to me as it is one of the best travel sites on the planet and one I used almost weekly for several years. Isn't it astonishing that the French nationalised railway should have one of the world's best internet presences and yet they still want to improve more? Doesn't that sound like an oxymoron?

Well, no it doesn't, not at all to me. All that surprises me is that anyone thinks this way in the face of the very obvious truth: if ownership makes any difference whatsoever when you're dealing with a large, and probably monopolistic organisation then the state owned organisation is likely to serve you better.

The reason is obvious. In a privately owned monopoly (such as the rail franchise which runs the train service to where I live) the only interest is in revenue maximisation. That's why they took the coffee trolley off the trains (to universal disgust) so they could add more inspectors who spend as much time as they can, it seems to me, terrorising people with family rail-cards who have failed to qualify for a discount for reason of sub-clause x.y of the regulations. I'm losing count of the number of times I've intervened now to offer people my card with the assurance that I'll act as their witness if action is brought against them when ticket collectors have lectured them on how they've broken the law, usually in aggressive fashion, to which I strongly object. But that's the culture of revenue maximisation.

The culture of public service is quite different. SNCF has it. It only fails in nationalised industries when they model themselves on the market, or when people who work for them are told they add no value. Our culture is to presume that anyone who works for the State adds no value. So we sometimes get what we expect. It's one reason why tax inspectors behave as they do.

But more often I wait interminably in queues, get poor service, meet poor managers with limited horizons and limited entrepreneurial skill, or just get frustrated when dealing with the private sector. I stress, more often: not always.

But the simple fact is that the public sector can put the customer first. The culture of private sector is to put them second. So I'd expect the public sector to do better.

This is part of the culture of the Tax Justice Network. We believe people supply service: owners don't. It's empowering people, not owners that matters. And sometimes that means the state is definitely the correct supplier of a service.