

Samuel Brittan - A fresh look at liberalism

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Samuel Brittan writes:

Many socialists and social democrats regard the negative definition of freedom as far too narrow and ask whether someone can be really free if he or she has not enough to eat or is deprived of the opportunity of a decent education. The confusion arises from the attempt to derive all public policy from one central goal. Freedom is not the same as prosperity, equality, self-government or any other desired state of affairs. These goals may sometimes be complementary, at other times competitive.

Of course those goals are competitive. There is no issue concerning rights where conflict does not arise.

But when rights relate to fundamental pre-conditions for survival then the reason why social democrats believe there is one central guarantor is simple: there is only one such guarantor.

Brittan implies there might be two, the second being the market. But that is not true. By definition the market requires failure - include failure to command sufficient resource to survive. History is littered with examples. Just before John Stuart Mill's wrote *On Liberty* in 1859 the British government had allowed the potato famine to happen in Ireland because the market demanded it.

If a person believes, as I do, that each person is of equal worth then the only guarantor that they will have opportunity to explore the opportunities that gives rise to is the state.

It will not always get that process right. The state is made up of human beings who will make mistakes. And of course it is possible that the state will restrict the chance to explore the opportunities life offers when basic need has been met too significantly on occasion. I accept that is a risk because I also believe the market has a clear and

important role in letting people make choice to fulfil their potential. The boundary between market and state is just one of the problems of competitive goals.

But I'd always argue that it is better to get this balance between the state and market a little wrong on occasion that than not try to ensure basic standards for all.

Which is why Brittan is wrong. He's not a liberal at all. His view of liberalism is promotion of the freedom to take advantage for some at direct cost to, and even at direct risk to, others. And that's not acceptable. Because that's not freedom. That's the exact opposite: it is the promotion of the climate of fear.