

How many spare bedrooms does a person need before they...

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My first, instinctive, reaction, to George Monbiot's suggestion that [there should be a bedroom tax on private property was to say 'no way'](#). Long experience has, however, taught me to mistrust such reactions and to also question their motivation. I have little doubt that in this case I foresee a time when, I hope, not many years from now, my sons will have left home and such a tax might bite at a time when I might still want to keep 'their bedrooms' available for very occasional use. Could this have been the basis of my reaction? I, of course, do not know, but I am sure that George's suggestion that a tax on the extent to which a property is left vacant has very real merit and is worthy of real consideration.

The simple fact is, as Danny Dorling has pointed out, that we have enough bedrooms in the UK to house everyone in need of a home. Our problem is that they are misallocated, so that some people have very many more rooms each than others enjoy, if they enjoy any at all. I have to be honest it: you could put me in that category. There's also the issue of scale: some bedrooms are very small indeed (as I well recall from my days in London).

So what George Monbiot is doing is poking a very sharp stick at how tax can, if properly designed, have a big impact on a whole range of policy issues. First of all, of course, there is housing policy. I am quite sure that we do need new houses, but I also know they are going to be a long time in delivery without some major reforms.

Secondly there is environmental policy: we do have a green belt for a reason.

Third there is transport policy: most houses are needed where existing houses already are. This will be more pressing in the future.

Fourth there is inequality. Access to housing is a major issue in this, both in terms of wealth and inter-generational justice. Innovative thinking is needed on both issues: this suggestion falls into that category.

And there is the need to raise revenue, of course. Local authorities need money if social services, in particular, are to be protected.

So, is a tax on spare bedrooms fair? Not, of course, if it creates the gross injustices that have been seen in the case of the current bedroom tax on those claiming social security. Due allowance for need has to be made, and I think a spare bedroom is not an unreasonable thing to have, if I am honest. But how many spare bedrooms does a person need? That is a perfectly fair question and if the answer is 'many' then to bear the social cost of keeping them from use via a tax charge is, like many other taxes on externalities, simply an exercise in repricing goods and services that the market fails to charge for appropriately.

There is much discuss here, but the initial reaction to a bedroom tax, precisely because, maybe, it has that name is wrong. George Monbiot has done a service by raising an awkward, but appropriate issue.