

The moral flaw inherent in suppressing both labour and ...

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The government has announced new restrictions on the right of unions to fund political parties as well as on the right to strike. The restrictions on funding were not in its election manifesto. I am not going to get overly absorbed in the detail or the consequence for the Labour Party, to which the majority of unions are not affiliated. I am much more interested in two, in my opinion, more significant, philosophical issues.

The first is the restriction on access to politics that appears to be a goal of this government. There are at least three obvious strands to this move. The first is this crack down on political campaigning by unions. The second is the so-called Gagging Law which restricted the campaigning rights of civil society organisations. The third is to be found in the more restrictive views now being presented on what represents acceptable political campaigning by charities. The moves cannot be unrelated: they are all, very clearly, part of a continuum of action.

What is notable is that none appear to have equivalent on the right wing of politics. So, for example, there are no restrictions on political contributions by employer organisations. Nor does the Gagging Law have almost any real impact on commercial lobbying whilst right wing thinking appears very largely untouched by changes in opinion on what constitutes political action by charities.

There is, it seems, an imbalance at play here. The logic appears to be that to structure society around self interest, market forces and the creation of inequality is natural ordering and so not political whilst the opposite view is unnatural and so political. There is, of course, no justification for this view: if the teaching of almost all wisdom and faith traditions is to benchmark what is natural it would be hard to find significant long term support for this view of the natural order. Nor does it, in practice, accord with either the stated opinions of a great many people in the UK or their actual actions, that appear considerably more inclined to social justice than any such suggestion implies, but this appears to have little sway on the government's dogmatic thinking. The implication is obvious, and is that there is, in practice, a deep insecurity inherent in this attempt to redefine the nature of what is political that may indicate a lack of confidence on the government's part that it is right. Why, otherwise, work so hard to suppress opinion?

The second issue is as fundamental. This relates to the view that is implied by these actions of people who have to work for a living. It is a fundamental human right, according to the United Nations, that a person should be able to withdraw their labour. The proposed change in strike laws puts such restrictions upon access to this right that the possibility that it will be denied to many has to be considered a very real possibility. This is in itself deeply troubling, but even that may not be the most worrying aspect of this, which is the indication that it gives that those proposing this legislation see most of those who work for a living as mere means to the ends of those who engage them. I know of no ethical code that thinks such an attitude acceptable, and yet it appears to be the underlying logic of this proposal.

In both these cases what is clear is that this government's proposals are deeply morally flawed. That is what really worries me. I cannot see how a strong, stable democracy or resilient economy can be built on the basis of such beliefs and that has consequences for us all.

NB: I am a member of Unite but of no political party. I have worked for a number of trade unions. The views expressed here are, as ever, personal.