

## Tax, advertising and mental health

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I am not alone, I am sure, in thinking that Prince Harry did something of real value in talking about his own mental health issues over the weekend. I admire his courage and example. But, in his role as a royal he can't be political and there are the politics of tax in mental health.

Most obviously there will be debate on resourcing that the royals cannot go near, but which others need to address. Provision is dire for too many.

That, though, is not my primary concern this morning. In my book [The Courageous State](#) I discussed issues around mental health and well-being and the relationship of both with the economy. And I pointed out that there is one industry that is dedicated to destroying well-being by creating universal dissatisfaction. That is the advertising sector.

I am not, of course, talking here about the small ad, informational or job advertisements. The advertising sector is that industry dedicating to creating wants where there is no need by spreading dissatisfaction with whatever it is that we might already have. Implicit in it is a lie: what can be guaranteed is that what is being promoted now will in the near future be dismissed as that which must be replaced. The offer of satisfaction it suggests available is, then, always known to be untrue. That this offer is delivered by seeking to manipulate our insecurities only adds to its perniciousness.

The motive that drives the activity of this sector has also to be considered when condemning what it does. The primary goal of advertising might be the promotion of sales to alleviate a deliberately created unhappiness with a person's perceived well-being, but the secondary goal has to also be taken into account. That secondary goal is to keep people in a perpetual state of indebtedness. Whilst people are indebted they are constrained. And that is the desired outcome.

It's hard then to think of anything more likely to induce stress, anxiety, low self esteem, and an inability to cope (at least financially) than advertising and the related consumer

credit sector. I think its role in mental health deeply pernicious, displaying every day a false impression to people made vulnerable to it by a continual bombardment of messages designed to undermine their self-worth.

What to do about it? I recall suggesting at least three things in *The Courageous State*. One was banning all advertising aimed at children. Children have a right to grow up without being bombarded by materialism.

Second, I suggested that no VAT should be recoverable by businesses on its advertising spend. This is already true on entertaining spending. I would extend the scope to increase the cost of advertising.

Third, there should be no corporation tax relief on advertising spending. The state should not be subsidising an abusive process by giving tax relief on it.

These are small steps but they matter. They say advertising can be harmful, and that is important. They also say the state will not subsidise an activity that fuels anxiety and so ill health. Compare the approach to that towards smoking and alcohol when it comes to physical health, I suggest. And, of course, funds are released as a result.

Tax and mental health are not commonly discussed in this way. I hope they might be. Of course I am not saying advertising causes all mental ill health. That would be absurd. But by continually undermining our sense of well-being advertising causes harm. And I think it time to explicitly address that fact. Tax reform lets us do that and delivers a powerful signal no advertiser could miss. That's why it's so important to do this.