

The freedoms that matter

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This [comment was posted](#) by regular commentator Andrew on the blog in response to my [comment on freedom this morning](#). I thought it worth sharing more widely.

Freedom is an analogue quantity: you can have more or less of it. It is also not a zero-sum game, and there is no limited supply, but one person's freedom can impinge on the freedom of another. Which is where balancing rights and responsibilities comes in.

Like “leveling up”, “freedom” is ambiguous until you say exactly what kind of freedom you mean. The OED starts with freedom from slavery or imprisonment, or from spiritual or contractual bondage, through liberty and independence from despotic or autocratic control, to liberty of action without encumbrance, hindrance or restraint, and self-determination, and then lists the following freedoms: freedom of will, freedom of conscience, freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom of thought, freedom of the press, freedom of expression, freedom of association. You could add freedom of the market — itself an illusion, because there is no market at all without common rules.

As a minimum, we could start with the Roosevelt's “four freedoms”:

1. Freedom of speech
2. Freedom of worship
3. Freedom of trade
4. Freedom from fear

So how are we doing on freedom from fear, and freedom from want? For millions of vulnerable people, “freedom day” is a cause for fear as the outside world is no longer safe for them. Millions will be looking at their precarious benefits or employment and facing imminent want.

These freedoms nudge up against Beveridge's “five giants”: want, disease, ignorance, squalor and idleness — which you could analyze as poverty, health, education, housing, and employment. Again, how are we doing at tackling these?

It seems to me the present government is entirely happy to create want (threatening to remove the £20 universal credit uplift, for example), disease (threatening the collapse and dismantlement of the NHS), ignorance (the atrocious way teachers and students have been treated in the last two years), squalor (you could start with Grenfell, and then the dark and airless hutches being created out of converted offices), and idleness (unemployment is bound to shoot up as furlough is withdrawn).

There is the horrible narrative that there is no alternative. Well, dammit, there are many alternatives. But how do we get there? Where is the opposition?