

Rationing, anyone?

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I was in discussion with one of the very first baby-boomers yesterday. He was born just after the Second World War. What he suggested was something very interesting. He, and his generation, remember rationing, which lasted well into the 1950s. And, he suggested, maybe they will now see it again. I admit I had not thought about this until he suggested the idea, but in the intervening hours it has occurred to me how pertinent his comment might be.

Leave aside the fact that we have a Covid crisis still, although you would not believe it given the behaviour of so many in the UK. Instead focus on food supply crises in many forms, a general logistics crisis, a power crisis, political crises, a threat of enforced short working, and an economic crisis as many in the country will not be able to make ends meet through no fault of their own which may well be exacerbated by the fools at the Bank of England demanding interest rate rises and suddenly we are looking at a country in melt down.

That much of this has been self inflicted, by Brexit, by enforced undermining of working standards, by false business models that have ignored the importance of resilience, is beside the point for the moment. It is happening. And there is no sign that it is likely to get any better any time soon. Indeed, the suggestions are that it can only get worse and all we are seeing at present is the start of the chaos.

If this is true (and I accept that some (I stress, some) of these issues might resolve without full blown crises developing with regard to them) then there is a fundamental issue to be addressed, which is how the country keeps going. This, of course, is the ultimate test of resilience. That test arrives when markets fail and alternative measures have to be put in place to make sure that everyone can get access to what they need, even if they cannot have access to all that they want.

Does that mean rationing should be considered now? If not, why not, when it seems that we are on a one-way street to chaos at present? Wouldn't it be at least wise to presume that things might get worse and that appropriate measures might be required to ensure that everyone can access the basics of life?

We have, of course, done this before. It happened in WW2. We are not at war now. I hope we never will be again. But, in the face of a similar threat to supply chains why shouldn't the reaction be the same - that need should overcome ability to pay so that the wellbeing of all can be guaranteed by rationing essential commodities?

This would, of course, indicate the failure of neoliberalism. Its demise would be far more dramatic than the so-called winter of discontent in 1978/79 that saw out the post-war consensus, when uncollected rubbish was the big issue (although I note the Guardian reporting this morning that a refuse collection crisis may also be on its way). But the real problem on this issue is that there is nothing to put in the place of neoliberalism as yet. Well nothing except a Green New Deal that is, because the left has no other ideas at present. So at the heart of all this there is an intellectual crisis, which is that of the failure of many on the left to consider any real alternatives to the market.

In the absence of such alternatives pragmatism will be required. I wouldn't rule out rationing as a result. In weeks to come many might begin to welcome the idea. I sincerely hope someone has a plan for it.