

On comments

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I am aware, as some people noticed, that I became irritated by some comments on the blog over the weekend. I let it show. To anyone I offended, I apologise.

Over the years, I have got used to receiving critical comments from those who I would expect to oppose my views. I have developed a thick skin, a direct style of response and a banned list to deal with those making such comments. That has been the only way to survive 17 years of writing a blog.

Over the same years, I have tried hard to provide a safe space for discussion. I tend to block even relatively mild criticism of one commentator by another for precisely the reason that I usually doubt such comments to be helpful.

That said, I am generally happy to be constructively criticised. Most of such comment helps. I develop my thinking based on comments, which is why I engage with them, unlike most bloggers, let alone journalists. I well remember being told years ago by Guardian journalists that there was only one way to survive writing on the web when comments were permitted, which is to never read any of those comments, let alone reply. I have ignored that advice and those journalists who know that wonder about two things. One is how my sanity survives the process, and the other is how I find the time.

The last is a particular point. I monitor comments on the blog pretty regularly, 15 hours a day, seven days a week, pretty much every day of the year. Mostly that's not a problem. When it feels like a hostile environment, it can feel like a burden. I am only human, after all.

But why did the irritation arise? I have needed to think about that and this is the best explanation I can offer. Whilst I don't believe all models of behaviour are helpful, I have sometimes felt the Myers-Briggs personality type indicators quite useful. I am an INTJ. Look it up for an explanation. What that, broadly speaking, suggests is that I think in an introverted way to explore how big systems work, which is my particular interest in almost everything I do.

That does not mean that I am insensitive. Nor does it mean I cannot empathise. But it does mean that I look at macro-level activity almost instinctively, which is quite rare in society. And when doing so, I seek ways to make systems work better.

I stress the word 'better'. Nothing is perfect. It is pointless to pretend such solutions exist. So, what I also try to do when imagining big systems is to think about how they can achieve results with minimum fallout. My thinking on tax haven transparency, now at least partly reflected in international tax systems, does reflect this approach. But still, not everyone will be happy with it.

When it comes to cash, my starting point is the recognition that whether we like it or not, it's going to disappear. That is not just because banks made that possible. It is because that is what traders and most people who are spending want. I asked cafe owners this weekend what proportion of their takings were in cash. The feedback was less than 25%, and declining. And this is in a rural area. In Sweden, it would be 100% card. It is the only country I have ever been to for a while where I have never needed to use the currency. In the US the proportion would be much more in favour of cash. It is social norms driving these changes. They will happen. I am not proposing them: I am considering what they mean and seeking to contextualise them. That is how I work.

In that case, to be blamed for things I am not doing just makes blogging seem that much harder. And some of the comments have been a bit direct. They also fail to appreciate that I do, when I observing such issues, always have a bias to try to make things work for those least able to adapt, whilst recognising that law to prevent abuse is required - as anyone who wants a functioning government must recognise.

So, might I ask for a little understanding of where I am coming from, some acceptance that I do try to listen and am not a monster, plus a degree of tolerance for the fact that I do my best here, whilst being human - and when the feedback lacks what feels like empathy to me then it is harder to raise the enthusiasm to do it?