

Selfishness cannot be the basis of society

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Amongst the newsletters that I subscribe to is that of the Institute of Economic Affairs, the far-right, near Tufton Street based, mysteriously funded, so-called think tank.

Just before Christmas, a newsletter from its new director suggested that because he was having difficulty in deciding what to buy his sister-in-law for Christmas and feared that he might resort to gloves again, this was ambiguous evidence that we are, universally, unable to work out what another person wants and therefore the state should not presume to know what it is that people desire and should, as a consequence, leave us our own money to spend so that we might make the choice for ourselves.

As an example of personal incompetence turned into a policy-making proposal, this took some beating. That was not least because he ignored the option of a gift card, which would have exactly met the criteria that he supposedly imposed upon any such process by providing his sister-in-law with the freedom to choose for herself. Hypocrisy, mixed with straightforward incoherence, knows no limits on the right wing of politics.

But there is something more serious about this. The logic on view demonstrated three things.

The first is that, unsurprisingly, these so-called think tanks are still as dedicated as ever to a dogma that even they, apparently, cannot comprehend, let alone act upon.

Second, these groups are also so used to privilege that they cannot understand the difference between needs and wants. I would agree with them, and anyone else, that meeting wants is not the purpose of government. By definition, a want can only exist when needs have been met. This means that they will always, and by definition, be personal and whimsical in nature. It is not the job of government to interfere in such choices, if they happen to be available to someone.

It is instead the job of government to ensure that needs are met, and the nature of most needs is easy to define, and their absence is glaringly obvious in the lives of those impacted by them. And since almost no (unless under the influence of market-induced

addictions) chooses to not meet a need, but does instead suffer them because of the structural consequences of the organisation of the society within which they live, which prevents them from doing so, it is, of course, the job of government to intervene to ensure that needs are met.

The failure to differentiate between the meeting of needs and wants is a perfect example of a category error of understanding by those privileged persons who work for these so-called tanks that are so lacking in empathy that the glaringly obvious passes them by.

Thirdly, what this claim shows is that the commonplace approach of the neoliberal, which is to take a micro situation and extrapolate it to the macro environment, implicitly assuming that this is a valid basis for reasoning, is totally misplaced. Unfortunately, almost all macroeconomic theory is created on this basis, with the exception of things like modern monetary theory and the economics that people like Steve Keen promote.

We all know that selfishness has an evolutionary role, which is why the gene that drives it has clearly not been extinguished. The goal of survival does, after all, have merit on occasion. I am not ignoring it. However, the idea that the right-wing wish to promulgate that we are really incapable of knowing the needs of others is utterly absurd and reveals personality traits that are rather unattractive.

Selfishness cannot be the basis of society. We cannot always walk on the other side. Those who suggest that we can have seriously misunderstood what it is to be human.