

Funding the Future

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I spent a lot of time thinking over the weekend.

There were moments for leisure, birdwatching, a family meal and film, and for working out how the gear chain on a model locomotive might be improved, but I admit that quantum biology and a question that PSR posed on this blog, when he asked not why I do things, but how do I approach my work, all made me think quite a lot.

There is no quantum essay this morning. Nor is there an essay in any other series. I did not get around to preparing one. Please accept my apologies. But the question of how I approach my work is one worth addressing.

Some years ago - and I cannot recall how many now - I became familiar with the idea of solution-focused thinking, which is in turn related to solution-focused therapy. It has pervaded much of my work since then, creating a difference in approach that I think is important.

As we all know, there is a tendency in politics, economics and the media to focus on problems rather than on solutions. We are repeatedly told what is wrong, who is to blame, and how bad things might become, but what we are very rarely told is how they might be made better. To me, that failure matters, not least because the simple act of repeating stories of failure appears to deliberately condition us to believe that things cannot be changed.

Solution-focused thinking challenges this assumption. It does three things:

- * It asks us to imagine what the world would be like if a problem were solved, assuming in the process that this is always a possibility that is within our reach, which I think is fundamentally important.
- * It asks us to identify the impediments to achieving that goal.
- * It requires that we imagine how those impediments could be removed.

In other words, solution-focused thinking starts from the idea that the future is not predetermined. It assumes that we can act to improve outcomes. This first, and fundamental element to it, differentiates it from the fatalism that underpins so much contemporary policy discourse. If we think nothing can be done, then nothing will be done. That is where most cowardly politicians (as I call them) are on most issues, and I

think they are wrong.

Second, thinking about solutions shifts attention. To be solution-focused demands curiosity about what might be rather than constantly seeking to apportion blame. That difference requires that we use imagination and means that politics must be a creative act rather than a punitive one.

Third, solution-focused thinking is profoundly pragmatic, which appeals to me. It does not require perfection. It asks, instead, what works, and for whom. The point is not to design an ideal world, but to take steps that move us toward one whilst recognising that the ideal might never be reached, not least because one person's idea of utopia might be another person's hell, and so compromises are inevitably going to be necessary *. That is why solution-focused thinking sits uneasily with ideology: it values what delivers over what sounds right, in the process rejecting much of the nitpicking pedantry that has so undermined left-of-centre politics for so long and prevented so much happening.

Fourth, such thinking necessarily demands inclusion. Solutions cannot emerge from within closed systems that protect the status quo. They require engagement with those who experience problems directly, whether those problems be poverty, underfunded public services, or environmental crises. Listening to those affected is not an option: it is essential if solutions are to be found. Solution-focused thinking is not done to people; it is done by people. This is why so many of our institutions of power - from politics and the Bank of England onwards - need to be radically changed so that the exclusion that characterises them now is eliminated.

Fifth, and perhaps most important, solution-focused thinking changes the politics of possibility. It builds confidence that interventions can work. When people see positive change, even in small increments, the cynicism that feeds authoritarianism begins to ebb. Despair is replaced by participation.

The consequences are profound.

In economic policy, it means refusing to accept austerity as inevitable and instead designing systems that use the state's fiscal capacity to achieve full employment and social well-being.

In taxation, it means designing structures that close loopholes, reduce inequality, and promote the care economy rather than lamenting the tax system's failure as unchangeable.

In climate policy, it means moving from targets to transformation; from describing the problem to implementing the transition.

That is why I believe in solution-focused thinking. It is radical. It insists that we can build

the world we want rather than merely describe the one we have. It challenges neoliberal fatalism, managerial passivity, and the endless invocation of “there is no alternative.” There always is, if we are prepared to look for it. And what it shows is that the real barrier to progress is not a lack of resources, knowledge, or imagination. It is a lack of will. Solution-focused thinking restores that will. It reclaims politics as a practical, hopeful endeavour. It reminds us that problems are not causes for despair. They are invitations to act.

Notes

*** An afterthought links this idea to the quantum series and recognises that the second law of thermodynamics means that perfection is never going to be sustainable, and so is a pointless goal.**

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