

Building growth of government into the language and budgets

The first law of government is that it continuously expands, and the third is the way left of centre parties make that their main cause. The process is aided by the way much of the media conducts the public debate, by the balance of lobby groups, by the very language used about government and by the budgeting systems used.

The media parades lobby groups who want more spent and more done by government as their daily diet of political news. They rarely give time to the few groups who want citizens to do more and for citizens to have more freedom. Anyone seeking a tax cut is asked what spending they will cut, whilst anyone wanting more public spending may not be asked what tax they wish to put up.

The language of politics deployed implies government is virtuous and uniquely able to do what is right. Any abuse or inequality brings forward strong lobby groups for a government answer even though some of the abuses and inequalities have been created by previous government interventions. A mistake by a private sector company is exposed and pursued whilst larger errors by public services are often excused or glossed over. Any train problem for example is wherever possible directed to private train companies away from nationalised Network Rail and the public regulators.

The budgets are rarely expressed in pounds in the way the rest of us have to budget against a background of a fixed net income. They are recast in so called real terms. Commentators assume inflation linked increases and often require a special and higher inflation figure to be included. They often also assume already agreed increases. Politicians usually concentrate on so called new money, meaning a further increase in sums agreed over and above the base budget. The dishonesty of budgets distorts the debate, with debates always being about cuts yet public spending goes up every year. The complex ways of claiming increased money is a cut also makes it difficult for most people to join in, as a privileged public spending elite pursue their own arranged figures for their own benefit. All my political life I have heard about cuts, yet there has been a huge cash increase and substantial real increase in overall spending.

The public sector gurus dismiss the idea of productivity gains in the public sector, or pencil in low figures for them. Whilst it is clearly true that to have a high quality health service you need plenty of good quality nurses and doctors, the rise of ever better technology should allow productivity gains. Many parts of the public sector are large administrative systems where computer technology should allow substantial productivity wins.