

Public sector inflation

The point I am making today is the trading public sector has got a lot dearer over the years. Ministers from governments of all complexions do not seem to exercise much control over costs and productivity of public bodies.

I looked at the 1960 Guidebook to Dover Castle that my family had bought on some long past visit. My computer tells me the Bank of England and successive governments have so devalued our currency that modern prices are 21.5 times higher than they were in 1960 on average. The Ministry of Works government Guidebook gave me some insight into public service inflation since then.

Dover Castle remains owned by the state with its visitor activities run by the charity English Heritage, an evolution from the Ministry of Works. The book says an adult visitor in 1960 would have paid 5p to see the Keep, lighthouse and ramparts, and another 1.25p to go into the tunnels. To do the same today the adult visitor buying a ticket at the site would pay £23.60. That is 377 times the cost in 1960, many times the rate of general inflation.

It is true there are now additional tunnels to see as in 1960 the Second World War tunnels were still out of bounds to visitors. The presentation of the Keep has changed, The collection of medieval armour and weapons adorning part of the interior has been replaced with modern soft furnishings and a bit of wooden furniture with designs taken from contemporary illuminated manuscripts. Whilst as the old Guidebook notes the interiors and their windows had been changed over the centuries the current aim is to present it in its Henry II version as best judged.

The Guidebook itself has experienced a bit less inflation. The old one is considerably smaller with one colour photo and more smaller black and white photos. It cost 10 p compared to £5.50 for its modern and bigger counterpart. That is inflation of 55 times or nearly treble the general inflation rate. There was plenty of good reading material in the 1960 version but the colour photos and art work are much better in the modern one.