It's the other factors that get you every time [1]

Written by **Tim Worstall** [2] | Sunday 25 November 2012

We're all well aware of Polly Toynbee's mantra that "We should be more like Sweden". I'm sure at least some of you will be aware of the various times I've made fun of that very mantra. What, you mean we should privatise the fire and ambulance brigades? Have a pure school voucher system? Charge people a (nominal) sum for a doctor's visit? Have a state financed and multiple providers health care system? Switch the national dish from roast beef to meatballs?

While I do have fun with making such japes there is an important underlying and usually unacknowledged point to be made. Sure, we can look at Swedish childcare and say that's not so bad (or is, to taste). Or births outside marriage and see that they don't cause the fall of civilisation. But looking at only such things andnot at the deeper structure of the society can make that a very dangerous method of comparison. As one of my favourite up and coming economists points out here [3]:

> In a responce to Ross Douthats thoughtful column, Krugman writes ?In Sweden, more than half of children are born out of wedlock ? but they don?t seem to suffer much as a result, perhaps because the welfare state is so strong. Maybe we?ll go that way too. So?? This is highly misleading. In secular Sweden, family traditions differ from those of the United States. Cohabitation (?samboförhållande?) is formally recognized and treated by the law as virtually identical to marriage. Swedish couples typically cohabitate, get children and only then get marry.
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> Statistics Sweden explains: ?Living together without being married has long been common and majority of the children born in Sweden are born out of wedlock, but usually cohabiting, parents. Cohabitation can in many respects equated with being married, and young adults has been widely accepting of couples with children remaining unmarried. Despite this, most couples choose to married eventually.
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> Of the couples that are followed in this report and still lived together at the end of 2010, 73 percent married, while 27 percent were still cohabitating?.About 10 percent of couples did not live together when the child was born, but most of these couples have lived together before or after birth. Approximately 3 percent of all couples never lived together and had a child outside of a relationship.?

There's a very large difference between couples living together and having children without a church or state sanctioned piece of paper and people being single parents from the get go. A society in which that true single parenthood is rare will be different from one where it is common. And this isn't to say that that true single parenthood is either good or bad: only that it is indeed different from non-married coupledom.

The point being that we cannot look at a socially extremely conservative country like Sweden and then import a system wholesale into a much more socially liberal one like the UK. Well, we can of course and to some extent that's what a large number of people are campaigning for. But it's not going to work the same way at all: because the underlying attitudes are different. And this doesn't just apply to the UK and Sweden either. We can't, wouldn't, import the US attitude to guns, imprisonment or race either.

Another way to put this is that sure, many systems to do many things work in many other countries. But the important thing to work out, before trying to adopt them, is why do they work in those societies? Only once we've done that can we even attempt to work out whether they would work in our own, rather different one. As an example I offer you this thought: Britain, and certainly England, has always been rather more individualistic than much of the rest of Europe. So why does anyone think that simply importing a foreign communalism will work here?

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