

## [John Gray on Public Services](#) [1]

Written by [Tim Worstall](#) [2] | Monday 11 February 2008



In the course of this piece bewailing the State of the Nation (yes, we do get the standard "the rot set in with Margaret Thatcher") John Gray makes one point that I fully [agree with](#) [3]:

*We should junk the idea that state services should always be run as businesses; this has left public services struggling with debt and fixated on targets. It would be better to hive off some functions from the state altogether while accepting that others should be managed on non-market lines. We should be ready to give back autonomy to institutions. Devolving power has become the catchword of the hour for the opposition parties, but it involves more than giving schools and hospitals more discretion to decide their budgets. It means leaving them free to manage themselves whether or not the result is efficient.*

It's that second sentence there. I'm all in favour of certain things being run upon non-market lines: I would be most unhappy with the idea that we might go back to a more feudal arrangement about armies, that the best one amongst competitors gets to plunder the country as long as it is indeed the best. Similarly the criminal justice system: entirely happy with the idea that this is a single monopolistic system.

Similarly I'm entirely happy with the idea that certain functions should be hived off from the State. The detailed management of the education or health care systems, as an example (and I would argue that that "discretion" urged would best be met by simply slapping a voucher on the back of everyone and letting them go take their pick).

But really this is simply covering old ground. There are certain things that only the State can do and thus they are the things that it must do. Just about everything else can be left to a free people to work out for themselves. The only argument any of us is really having is which of those two classes does any specific subject or activity fall into? My answer might be more minimalist than yours but it's informed by more than either ideology or simple cynicism.

Give the pig's ear being made of the criminal justice system, one of those things that the State must do because only it can, why would we want them to do anything else which we might usefully do for ourselves?

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[1] <http://www.adamsmith.org/blog/politics-and-government/john-gray-on-public-services>

[2] <http://www.adamsmith.org/taxonomy/term/5778>

[3] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/feb/10/britishidentity.health>

[4] [http://disqus.com/?ref\\_noscript](http://disqus.com/?ref_noscript)

[5] <http://disqus.com>