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The Whig view of history [1]

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"The Whig view of history" is more often than not now used as a pejorative. When first coined it was to describe a narrative where everything just got better all the time. Whiggish people (almost universally the Great and the Good among white men), Whiggish politicians (this is all for your own good!) and Whiggish activists (we know what is right for you!) enabled civilisation to scale previously unheard of peaks of delightfulness. Certainly it's true that many things done were imporvements, but it always carried the overtone that the next set of Whiggish ideas would enable the scaling of ever yet more ecstatic mountains of joyousness. You can't argue against those ideas, for, see, civilisation is made up of all the ideas that we have previously so righteously proposed.

Which leads to the European Commission and their recent declaration of what we might call economic Whiggism [3]:

> In many developing countries, the sustainable provision of public services that is necessary to achieve and maintain the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) requires an increase in domestic revenue. Their tax-to-GDP ratio ranges between 10 to 20% as opposed to 25 to 40% in developed countries.

You see what they've done there? We've built high tax large State economies. We are also rich and developed. Therefore, those countries which wish to become rich and developed must have high tax large State economies.

The first objection is the cart before horse bit. It's at least possible that the high tax large State bit comes after the rich and developed bit. It certainly did in the UK, the US and even, yes, in Sweden. So saying that tax as a portion of the economy needs to rise in order to allow development and richness is, well, a little odd really.

But the second objection is rather larger. It's repeating the Whig view. That what exists now is wondrous and everyone who wants to get to this level of wondrousness must do it in the same manner we did. That is, do what the Great and Good tell them to. Not just that "we think this is the best way to do it" but that because high taxes are the only way to develop it entirely closes off the possibly policy discussion space of a low tax, small State, mode of development.

As an example, think of telecoms development. We rich countries built landline networks. But no development advisor these days would recommend that a country without one build one. Technology has moved on and a mobile network makes much more sense.

Now it might be true that only a high tax large State economy can deliver what people want: but that should

be a subject for discussion. Perhaps a low tax, small State might be better, given that quite a lot of things have changed since we N. Europeans developed? Perhaps a fee paying education sector is better than a State financed one? Perhaps less free at the point of use medicine is better than our own current all free at the point of use? Perhaps a free market in housing is better than our own very mixed one?

By insisting that how we got where we are is the only way anyone can become developed, all of those very interesting lines of enquiry are blocked off.

But then that's the problem with having bureaucracies design the world for us. Anyone dull enough to climb to the top of a bureaucracy isn't going to be interesting enough to consider alternative worlds in which bureaucracy is not the way we do everything.

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