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Public Policy and Public Toilets (Yes Really)

Andrew Oswald, Professor of Economics, Warwick University

Website: www.oswald.co.uk

If you want to see what is wrong with the way Britain works, go into a public toilet. It is likely to be horrid. The state of our toilets -- rest rooms -- is not only a disgrace in its own right but, more tellingly, it offers an example of what goes wrong when politicians lose sight of the small things that matter in everyday life.

I am perfectly serious. No doubt you will have your own examples, but here are mine. Try, with a desperate young companion, to find a toilet in Bath's shopping district, for instance. For two whole shopping centres, there are three small toilets. Why? How about Oxford bus station. I suspect its toilets would not be allowed in a prisoner of war camp because they likely breach the Geneva Convention. What about Didcot railway station, a main intersection point for railways and a big commuter station into London? They are habitually dirty.

What is wrong with this country?

Understandably from a career point of view, our politicians focus on big issues. Airports. Railways. Schools. Rockets. This is the stuff that will get them on Newsnight and the Today Programme.

But it is the small things that matter just as much in the typical person's life, and it is these, in the sphere of public policy, where we could actually make progress if we tried. Fixing Britain's toilets would be cheap to do, and really help the quality of our citizens' lives.

Of course this is just an example. There are others: spending a little money to pick up all litter; having reliable gritters on icy winter mornings; and so on. To heck with the big stuff. Make the little stuff work properly.

At present, remarkably, forty percent of all Gross Domestic Product in Britain goes on state-run activities. Yet there is hardly a clean, nice

public toilet in our country. Almost everything in life, I can choose and do myself, without requiring Westminster or my local authority to behave sensibly. I do not have to rely on the state if I wish to put petrol in my car, provide me with a summer ice-cream, or get a haircut. I do not even, if I can afford it, need the state for my health cover or my education.

However, there are some things that are pretty much out of my control, and going to the toilet, as it were, is definitely one.

International standards have improved in the provision of services like toilets. It is frustrating when I go to a well-run country like Switzerland or Norway to see how it could be done. Although Heathrow has come on in the last couple of decades, I still do not think our airports are as impressive as those in many nations I visit, and the cleanliness of toilets is as good an indicator of a nation as any. Tourists must notice.

I am not suggesting that government should control our lives, nor that we ought to pay enormous taxes. My message is simpler. Why should I pay a third of my income into a system that does not even provide me somewhere pleasant to go to the loo when I am out of my house? Surely the first items that exchequer revenue should go on are basic human facilities. Make us comfortable and decent in the public areas of our nation. Spend cash on the collection of litter. Spend it on proper lighting for our alleys. Spend it on toilets. Then start worrying about what to do with the remaining tax revenue.

That's it. My word limit is up. I have to go.