

Why Economists are Not Popular

By Thomas Sowell

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One of the many reasons why economists are unpopular is that they keep reminding people that things have costs, that there is no free lunch. People already know that -- but they like to forget it when there is something they have their hearts set on.

Economists don't have to say anything when people are buying things at a shopping mall or at an automobile dealership. The price tags convey the situation in unmistakable terms. It is when people are voting for nice-sounding things that politicians have dreamed up that economists are likely to point out that the costs which the politicians have ignored are going to have to be paid, one way or another -- and that you have to weigh those costs against whatever benefits you expect.

Who wants to put on green eye shades and start adding up the numbers when someone grandly proclaims, "access to health care for all" or "clean air" or "saving the environment"? Economists are strictly party-poopers at times like these. They are often gate-crashers too, since usually nobody asked them how much these things would cost or even thought about these issues in such terms.

Some of the more persistent or insensitive economists may even raise questions about the goals themselves. How much health care at the taxpayers' expense? In Britain, a 12-year-old girl was given breast implants. That much health care?

Meanwhile, Britain's skyrocketing medical costs of taking care of things that people would never have spent their own money to take care of forced cutbacks and delays in more urgently needed medical treatments. One woman's cancer operation was postponed so many times by the British health service that, by the time the system could take her, the disease was now too far gone for medical help -- and she died.

Economists could have told anyone in advance that making things "free" causes excessive use by some, leaving less for others with more urgent needs that have to remain unsatisfied. Rent control, for example, had led to more room being occupied by some, who would not have paid the market price for as large an apartment as they live in, while others cannot find any housing that they can afford in the city, and have to live far away and commute to work.

Clean air? There is no such thing and never has been. There is only air with varying degrees of impurities, varying amounts of which can be removed at varying costs.

Removing the kinds of things that choke our lungs or otherwise threaten our health is usually not that expensive. But science is becoming capable of detecting ever more minute traces of impurities with ever more insignificant consequences. Yet where is the politician who is going to resist calls for removing more impurities in the name of "clean air"?

Who is going to resist calls to "save the environment"? Only an economist is likely to say, "Save it from what or from whom -- and at what price?"

Bumper stickers in and around Redwood City, Calif., long proclaimed: "Save Pete's Harbor." What did that even mean? In practice, it meant letting one set of people use it as a marina and

preventing other people from replacing the marina with housing.

When the Constitution of the United States says that the government owes "equal protection" to all its citizens, why should the government intervene on behalf of one set of contending citizens against another, much less call that "saving" the environment?

People have been bidding against one another for the same resources for centuries. Why replace that process with politicians' control? The 20th century was a virtual laboratory test of political control of economic activities -- and it was such a dismal failure that even socialists and Communists began abandoning that way of doing things by the 1990s.

Even when you don't realize that you are bidding against other people, you are. When you drive into a filling station and fill up your tank with gasoline, you are bidding against people who want petroleum in the form of heating oil, plastics or Vaseline.

Lunches don't get free just because you don't see the prices on the menu. And economists don't get popular by reminding people of that.

Questions:

1. Why does the author say economists are not popular? Why do you think he suggests that people do not face this same problem in their everyday lives?
2. What does the author say is the essential problem that Britain faces because it provides healthcare for all of its citizens?
3. What is the point the author makes about clean air and the environment? How come he makes this point?
4. What would you describe the overall argument of this article to be?