

What are governments for? The quest for coherence

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[Some questions]

- What is the role of the state?
- Do governments matter anyway?
- Should governments act on health?
- If so, in what circumstances?
- Do we have an underlying philosophy?

The minimalist view of the state

(as set out by The Economist, Wall Street Journal, Financial Times and the Project for a New American Century)

- To defend the borders of the state
 - Maintaining a standing army
- To support economic growth
 - Investment in infrastructure
 - Fiscal policy

Get the government of our backs... except:

- When it enforces our property rights
 - Chile: Overthrow of Allende after nationalising US interests (Venezuela next?)
 - Extra-territorial action to enforce intellectual property rights (generic drugs, music)
- When it comes to our rescue
 - Military intervention to rescue expatriates during coups
- When it funds the R&D costs of the things we make our money from
 - Basic science informing drug discovery

Beyond defending our borders and supporting economic growth?

What is our ideal state?

- **“Warm beer, cricket on village greens, and spinsters cycling to Evensong through the balmy mist”**
- **Liberty, fraternity, equality?**
- **Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness?**
- **Peace, order, and good governance?**
- **A life that is not “*solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short*”?**

Some things we *might* try to achieve?

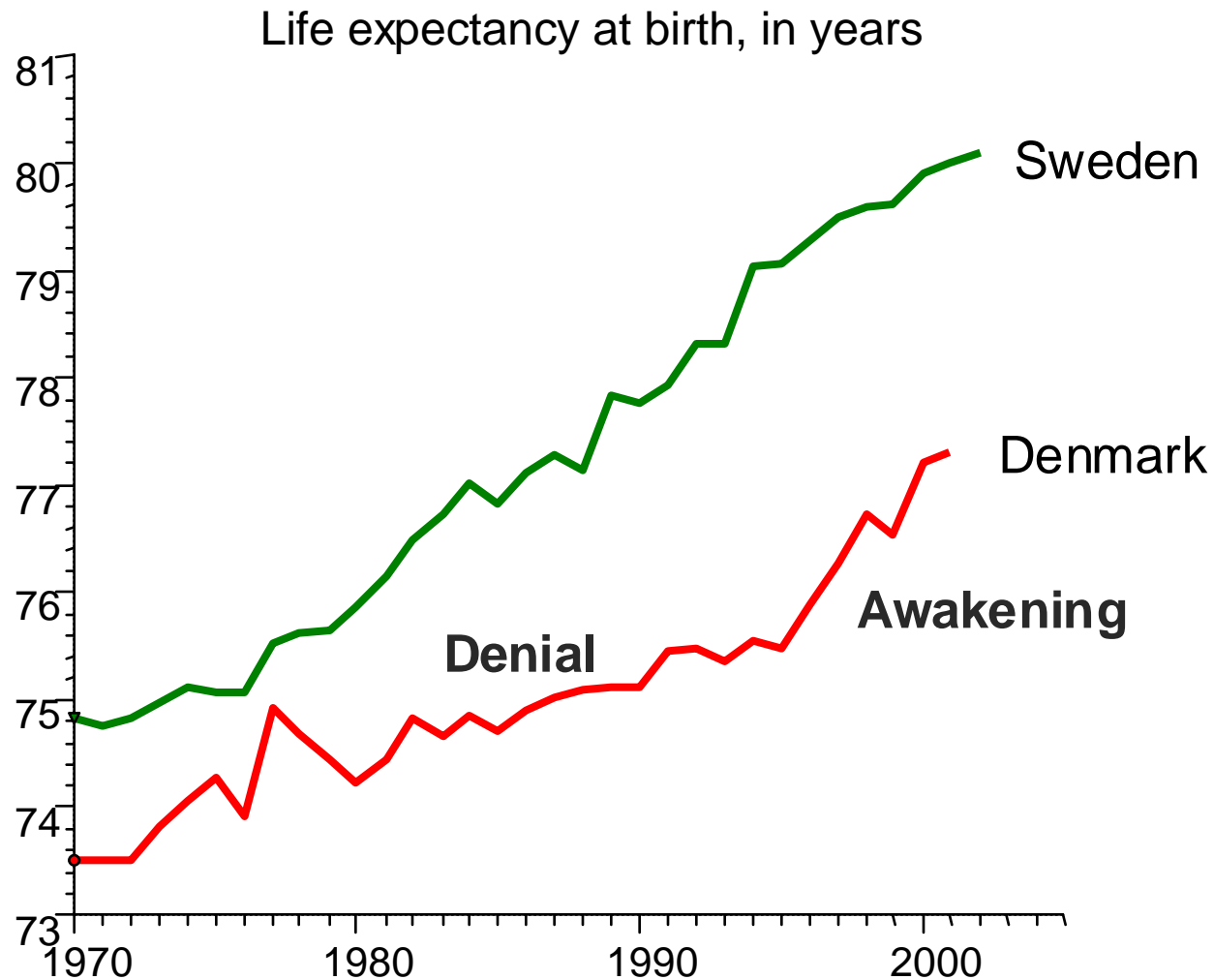
- Population growth?
 - French governments since 1870
- Clean air?
 - Post-war smog/ 21st century greenhouse gases
- A better educated population?
 - No child left behind
- Greater choice?
 - As an end in itself – New Labour in England
- More happiness?
 - Richard Layard
- **Better health?**
 - Amartya Sen

But do governments really matter?

“...there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families. And no government can do anything except through people, and people must look to themselves first.”



Yes, government policies do matter



But you first need to believe that something can be done

- Most of those facing the plague of Athens, in 430 BC, accepted their fate as the will of the Gods.
- Acceptance of the will of God cited as reason for failure by medieval Islamic authorities to act against epidemics
- Latin Christian authorities identified individuals (or groups, such as Roma) singled out by God to bear burden of suffering, and so nothing could be done

Some people still don't realise what is possible

- For years it was believed that smoke was intrinsic to the very nature of an Irish pub



Question: are the owners of “genuine Irish pubs” outside Ireland lying if they still allow smoking?

Answer: Yes

OK, governments matter, but should they interfere in health?

- “Gratuitous intervention” – Peter Skrabanek
- “Health fascism” – Bruce Charlton

W***kers

[The Guardian letters page today](#) is full of the anguished squeals of the **niconazis** up in arms because they haven't been able to get a law to jail anyone who even thinks about having a fag. **Dr Anna Gilmore, Prof Martin McKee, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.** Tropical Medicine? What the hell is that all about? And no-one consulted smokers about the ban during the sham consultation. 55% of pub-goers are smokers by the way.



Nanny Nico-Nazi

Governments always have acted on health (when it threatened elites)

- Infectious diseases
 - Danger that you will be infected by a consumptive
- Mental health
 - Danger that you will be murdered by a lunatic
- Sexually transmitted diseases
 - Danger that your soldiers will be rendered useless

But when should government act?

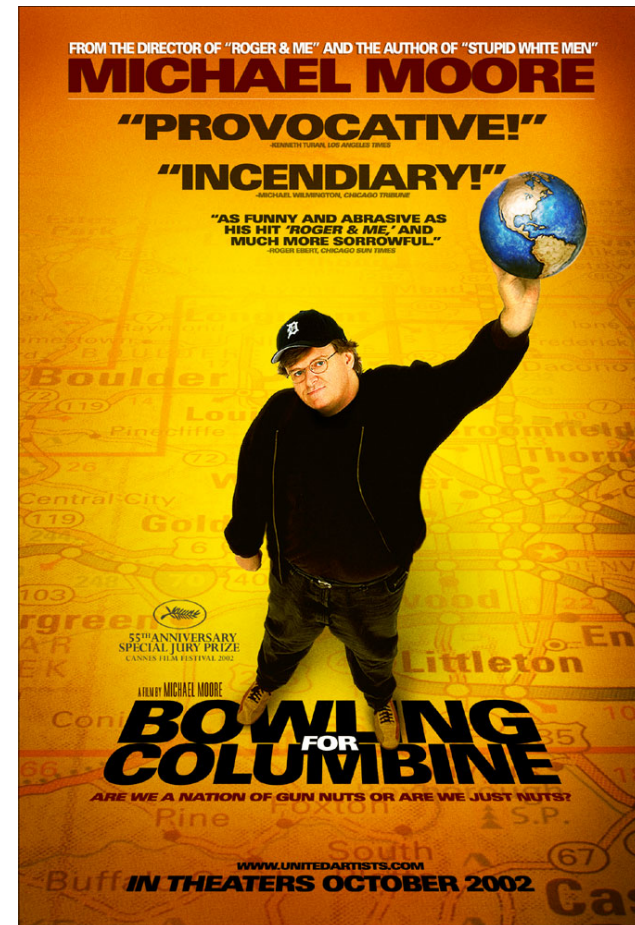
Are some lives more important than others?

- September 11th 2001
- Almost 3,000 people died in Washington and New York as a result of acts of violence involving weapons (box-cutters)
- Immediate response
 - All planes in US airspace grounded
- A few days later
 - no more box-cutters on planes
 - ... or Swiss army knives, nail clippers
- A few weeks later
 - Invasion of Afghanistan, followed shortly thereafter by Iraq



[Yet that same year...]

- 30,000 Americans killed by firearms
- Immediate response
 - (to be completed ...still waiting...)
 - Despite reminders
 - Virginia Tech
- But let's be fair, there was some action
 - 2004 – President Bush lifts ban on sale of semi-automatic assault weapons



[Yes, but, you're being selective]

- After all, the constitution confers the right to bear arms
- Our government will always come to our aid in an emergency
- Hurricane Katrina
 - Authorities unable to find enough buses to evacuate mainly African American population
- 40 million people without health insurance
 - A very basic safety net, with over 100,000 avoidable deaths of poor people each year

Whose side is government on? The clash of interests clash

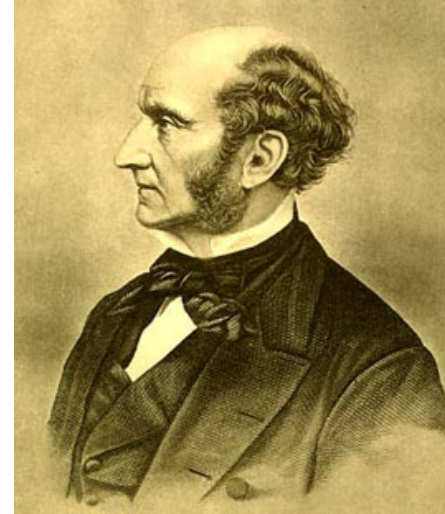
- The people vs. the narcotics industry
- The people vs. the arms industry
- The people vs. the tobacco industry
- The people vs. the alcohol industry
- The people vs. the food industry

[So have we a coherent philosophy?]

- What is the balance that should be struck between state intervention and individual freedom?
- Can our politicians make up their minds?

[On liberty: John Stuart Mill]

“The sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection. That the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilised community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not sufficient warrant. He cannot rightfully be compelled to do or forbear because it will be better for him to do so, because it will make him happier, because, in the opinion of others, to do so would be wise, or even right...”



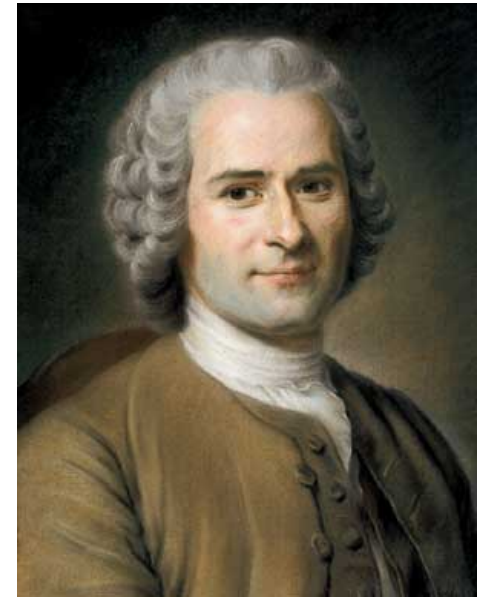
- Except those
 - "incapable of self-government"
 - living in "backward states of society"
- ... and some things, such as selling oneself into slavery

[But we do force people to do some things against their will (sometimes)]

- Not carry concealed firearms
- Not use mobile phones when driving
- Stop smoking around others
- Not drink and drive
- Wear seatbelts
- Wear motorcycle helmets
- Not smoke cannabis in private
- Go to school

[A matter of personal choice?]

"Man is born free
and everywhere he
is in chains."



Jean-Jacques
Rousseau

Our health is shaped by our environment

... damp housing leading to increased amounts of respiratory infection; household overcrowding facilitating the spread of infection; inadequate diet associated with low incomes ... failure to perceive the seriousness of childhood illnesses by poorly educated and informed parents; stresses leading to child abuse; a generally poor environment increasing the risks of child accidents; together with the everyday strain of coping with a demanding young family in inadequate circumstances in areas suffering from multiple deprivation.

(Robinson & Pinch, 1987)

Built environment

Do I walk or do I not walk?



Tibet

Los Angeles

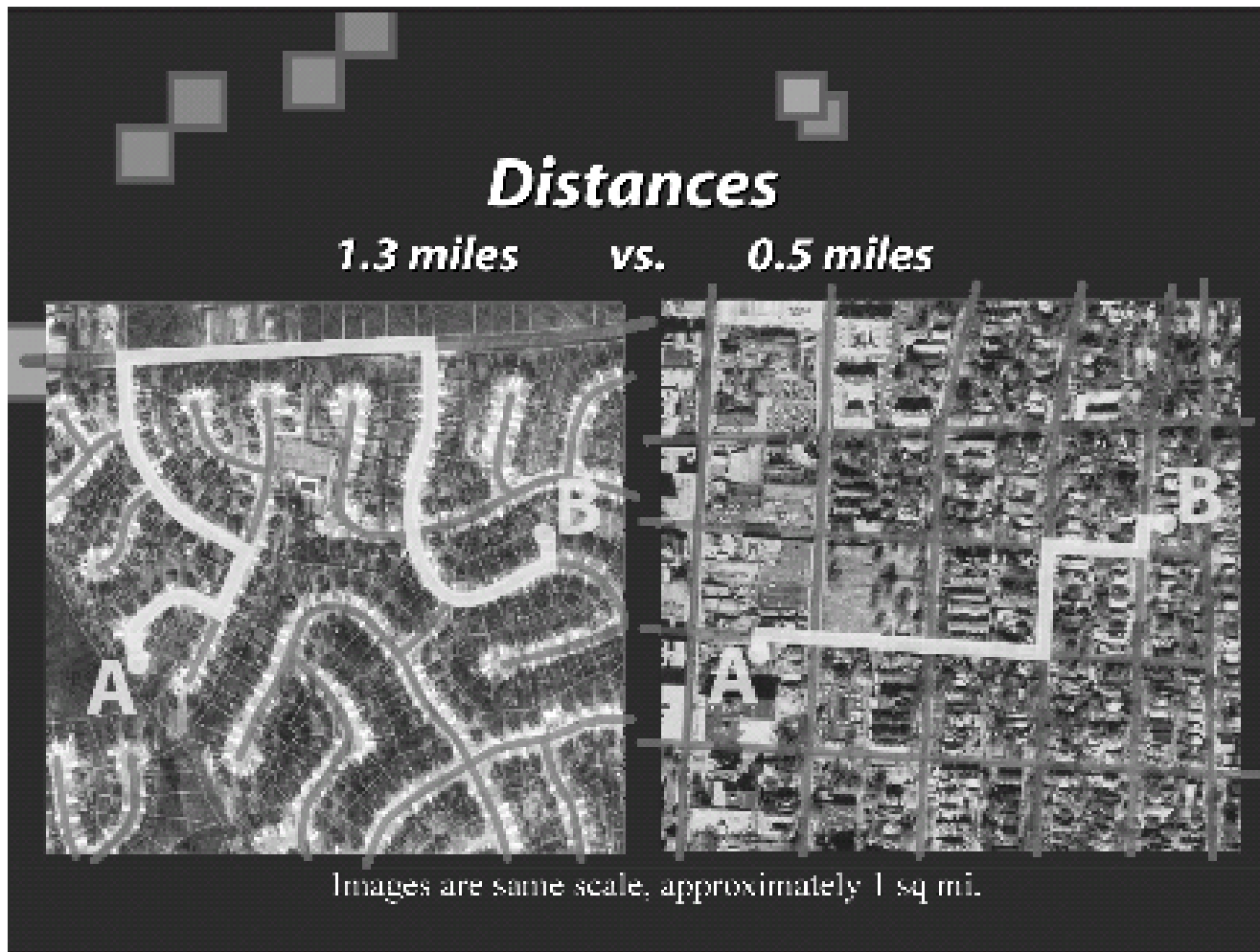
How active am I?



Personal responsibility?



Neighbourhood walkability



Source: Frank & Engelke 2005, figure 2, p. 199

Tobacco use

Do I inhale smoke?



China

California

Nutrition

Can I find a healthy diet?



Mongolia

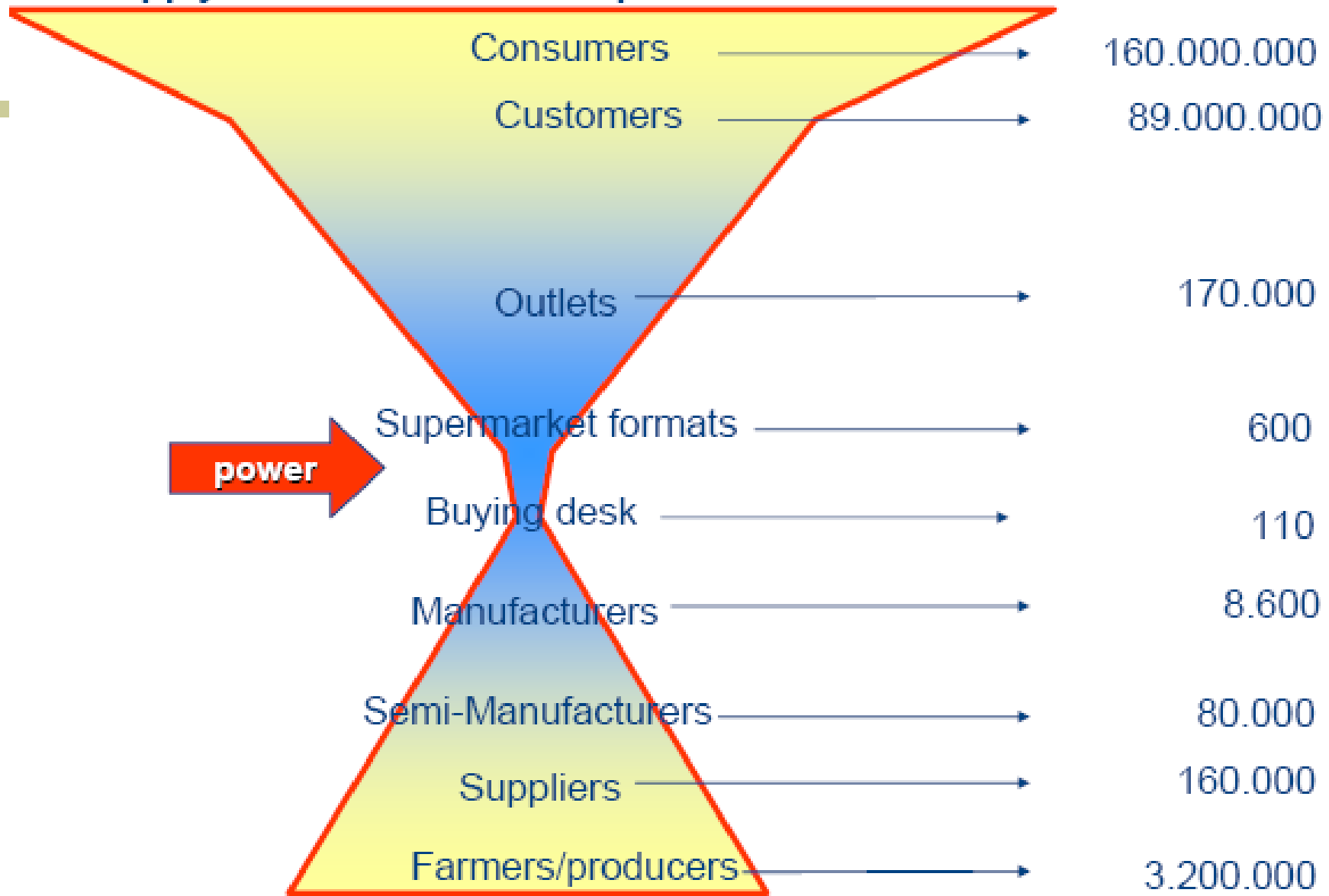
Crete

[Conversation in a Hungarian restaurant (1991)]

“A side salad please”

“A salad? – it’s winter!”

The Supply Chain Funnel in Europe



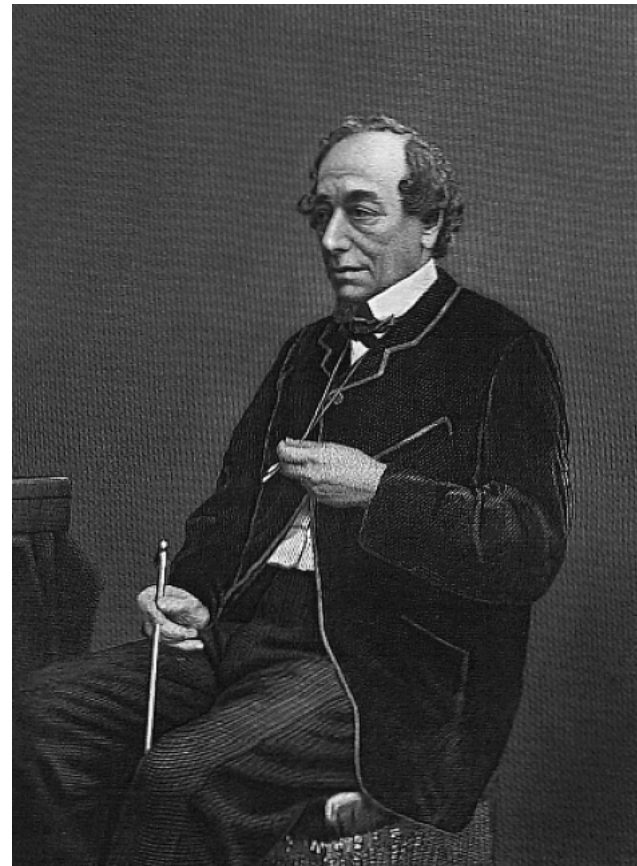
Cap Gemini Ernst & Young 2002

What do I eat?



Finally, who are we responsible for?

“Two nations between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy; who are as ignorant of each other's habits, thoughts, and feelings, as if they were dwellers in different zones, or inhabitants of different planets. The rich and the poor.”



Benjamin Disraeli



Health for all? A tale of two countries



[The role of the state?]



Responses to Katrina

Shame on anyone that makes this tragedy political, socio-economic or racial. ... in the land of opportunity and personal responsibility the individual is ultimately accountable.

Robert Buckley, Decatur, USA

BBC web site

...the federal government's lethal ineptitude wasn't just a consequence of Mr. Bush's personal inadequacy; it was a consequence of ideological hostility to the very idea of using government to serve the public good. For 25 years the right has been denigrating the public sector, telling us that government is always the problem, not the solution. Why should we be surprised that when we needed a government solution, it wasn't forthcoming?

Paul Krugman (NY Times 5th Sept 2005)

Medicine is a social science and politics is nothing but medicine writ large
Rudolf Virchow

[To summarise]

- What are we trying to achieve?
 - Wealth, health, happiness?
- Do we have a coherent philosophy?
- Do we recognise that people are not entirely free agents
- Do we see government as the problem or the solution?