



## Rory Stewart is wrong about the value of ‘big abstract ideas’

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Rory Stewart wants to make Britain a “much better and a much happier place”.

As he tours the country’s streets, delighting commentators (most of whom detest conservatism), the Tory leadership hopefully sees opportunity for its people. We might be currently “less than the sum of our parts”, he says, but Stewart sees a population “buzzing with ideas, just ready to be unleashed”.

That optimism is refreshing. You get the sense that Stewart believes what he says. But the “ready to be unleashed” framing is curious. If we are currently restrained from fulfilling our potential, then what are we being restrained by?

Libertarians have a clear answer — “government”. Theresa May thought it was “burning injustices” that government should alleviate. For Stewart — who spoke to CapX’s editor Oliver Wiseman this week — the problem is different. The issue is our politicians thinking at too high a level to solve “real” problems.

“I think the core to this is focusing not on big abstract ideas but real people in real places.” If only government concerned itself with the plight of specific individuals in specific circumstances — “Libby in Penrith not earning enough in order to get a home,” “somebody in Lewisham [who] doesn’t feel safe in their streets,” “somebody in Hastings...having to wait...four weeks for a GP’s appointment” — then we could solve all these small problems, unleashing “energy, compassion and, ultimately, love.”

This view will, no doubt, resonate with many. Who doesn’t instinctively think that getting down and dirty with the details of individuals’ situations would result in better outcomes than haughty talk of freedom, capitalism and democracy? In fact, there’s echoes here of the critique some classical liberals made against Gordon Brown and Tony Blair — that their poverty targets treated people like numbers on a spreadsheet, rather than real living human beings. For those who consider politicians detached from “real life”, Stewart’s chats with the public represent a new type of politics. It is problem solving and pragmatic.

Yet Stewart’s idea of state activism for individuals is neither new nor viable as guide map for government. The state as the supposed key to fix problems and generate social solidarity is a well-trodden and failed ideal; the dismissal of ideology a clarion call for all “third way” politics. The novel sounding part — that government can go around playing whack-a-mole on people’s individual challenges (a sort of “broken windows theory” writ large) — is hopelessly naïve.

Government, particularly central government, simply doesn't have the capacity, expertise or knowledge to go around solving small problems. No matter how many chats Rory has or information any bureaucrat acting in his stead collects, the state cannot act as troubleshooter at the individual level.

How, for example, would Stewart even begin to think about solving Libby's problem of not earning enough to buy a home? Is the problem that her hourly wage is too low, that she can't get the hours, or that houses in the area are too expensive? Could she afford to live elsewhere, but chooses not to? Was it a bad education that led to the low pay, or a lack of experience caused by the elimination of entry level jobs because of minimum wage hikes? Does she have a family or an elderly relative or dependents she cares for who require extra space? Does her ex-husband support her with her children?

The sheer amount of information necessary to really get to the bottom of it is mind-boggling. This is only one person, with one problem. Imagine Rory and mini-Rorys marauding around the country, fixing potholes, providing loans to those in self-declared need, or patching up public services wherever faults occur. The inevitable compromise of such action would be to end up treating the symptoms of problems rather than their structural causes, with a whole host of unintended consequences along the way.

In season two of the popular TV show *This Is Us*, do-gooder Randall Pearson purchases the run-down apartment block of his recently deceased father, vowing to improve residents' living conditions. At a residents' meeting, he brainstorms with tenants about the problems in the building, offering to fix the problems as soon as possible. He's deluged with requests – everything from broken doors to heaters, through to walls to remove. Trying to resolve all these small tasks, he eventually breaches a wall, releasing hundreds of cockroaches. Everyone has to move out to stay in a hotel. His wife, someone who has been working in housing for years, tells him that if he'd been tougher in resisting requests and followed established wisdom, he would have made sure to assess the roach problem first.

Stewart is similarly naïve about government. Sure, he can lament that many in politics focus on big, abstract ideas. But if you get the overriding structural challenges right, everything else becomes easier. If economic growth in the UK was significantly faster, and land-use planning in Britain more liberal, then a host of productivity, income, housing, and government finance problems that eventually manifest as individual struggles would be much more manageable.

Margaret Thatcher understood that, far from being problem shooters, governments should be limited, clear and well-resourced in their functions, passing predictable laws and delivering equality under them. By outlining to people what government will or won't do – setting a clear framework – individuals and their families can be set free to pursue their own paths and dreams. This approach leaves clear space for other institutions, those little platoons of family, faith and civil society that Burke talked about, to operate to alleviate practical problems, harnessing their local knowledge.

Sure, it doesn't always work as intended. As Raghuram Rajan's new book, *The Third Pillar*, discusses, not all communities function effectively. Sometimes actions in markets or ordinary government activities undermine and corrode community. But in jettisoning this approach entirely in favour of arbitrary activism, Stewart wouldn't be unleashing happiness and love, but competition for resources, resentment at arbitrary treatment and cronyism.

A belief that government is the first line of defence against individual challenges would crowd out individual initiative and community organisations. The decision to alleviate problems for “sheep farmers” by “subsidising them to the hilt” will lead to demands for similar treatment for steel, cars and eventually all industries that face external competition (indeed, there is no principle difference between Donald Trump and Rory Stewart on this, only subjective differences on which industries are important). If even an individual ‘not being able to afford a house’ is a challenge that the Prime Minister of the day is willing to take on, then there’s no worry too small, and a huge moral hazard problem will quickly develop.

I don’t know Rory Stewart and have no personal animosity towards him. By all accounts, he is a competent minister. His life experience is pretty incredible. So writing so much about a throwaway video might be regarded as over the top. But it’s quite remarkable for a purported “conservative” to be so willing to throw away so many hard-learned lessons of good government for such a romantic, *noblesse oblige* activism. Stewart truly believes that if only the serious people take over, the inevitable divisions that manifest in a free society can be somehow sown together one government troubleshooting session at a time. That’s a profoundly misguided and dangerous idea.

If you think I’m misrepresenting his worldview, here’s what Stewart said about his experience in Iraq in an interview with David Aaronovitch in 2017:

*“I think I believed that if I worked hard enough and was attentive enough to what happened at a very local level, listened enough, it would be possible to shape something which was at least slightly more humane, prosperous and stable than what was there when I arrived. Even 13 years on I’m still not able to provide a completely clear answer about why that didn’t work...I’m not an idiot either. People are underestimating how much we knew, and how hard we worked and what we did. That it wasn’t an amateur project at all. It failed for much more elusive and deep structural reasons.”*

Perhaps it’s worth focusing on those big ideas after all.

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