



Free No More

By: Allister Heath – January 9th, 2013

How free are British citizens? Not very, according to research out last night from the Cato Institute, which ranks us an all too realistic 18th. The league table uses indicators that assess what philosophers call negative liberty - the absence of coercion. These include freedom of speech, religion, individual economic choice, and association and assembly. In total, Cato's human freedom index assesses 76 metrics, including measures of safety and security (including private crime against property and state crimes against citizens), freedom of movement, and relationship freedoms. Countries that discriminate against groups on the basis of gender or sexuality would fare poorly, for example, as would those with high taxes or onerous regulations.

The freest country on the index - the first such table to fuse economic and "social" freedoms - is New Zealand, followed by the Netherlands, Hong Kong, Australia, Canada and Ireland. The US comes seventh, ahead of Denmark, Japan, Estonia and Switzerland. The UK is ranked a pretty pathetic 18th, but that remains better than France (33rd), Germany (35th) or Italy (40th).

If classical liberals, who believe that a free society is conducive to creativity, free thinking, innovation and growth, are right, this is not good news for the UK and it is terrible news for the main Eurozone powers. Excessive restraints on freedom lead to stultified, stagnant societies, as countries and empires have discovered over the centuries. This is true of economics - with yesterday's silly attack on pub companies by Vince Cable another blow - as well as other forms of individual choices. Let us hope we eventually remember this before it becomes too late.