

Abusing Human Rights

Thought for the Day

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When you're addicted to news and current affairs, as I am, one of the advantages of a long drive is being able to spot patterns in the uninterrupted radio coverage.

So yesterday, a definite theme emerged. First there was the news about initiatives to encourage long-term unemployed parents back to work; then in another programme, a supposed educational expert said parents who don't like aspects of public education should be helped to opt out; and finally there was an interview with an ambulance driver who said he can't respond to genuine emergencies because he's been called out by people with colds or verukas.

These all raise questions about how deep to dig into the public purse to meet individual demands, and about how to resolve conflicting needs. I've never heard anyone argue that buses should detour to serve their house – if I can't or won't walk to the bus-stop, I can call a taxi! Yet that's exactly what sometimes seems to be demanded of other public services.

There does sometimes seem to be a growing confusion of "I want" with "I need", coupled with a disregard for the wants or needs of others. Some people lay this at the door of the culture of Human Rights, which is now enshrined in law – but I don't think it right to blame the principle for some people's opportunism.

Not all human rights claims succeed, nor should they. The laws exist to give protection to basic human dignity, not to provide for every individual whim.

As we mark the bicentenary of the 1807 Act to abolish the slave trade, we should be quite clear about the depth of the inhumanity Wilberforce campaigned against, and not devalue it by using the same language of rights to demand taxi rides from the ambulance service!

Of course we should be able to assert our rights – but we should always also be aware of the rights of others.

The rabbis of the Talmud put it well: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me – but if I am only for myself, what am I?"

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