

No Parking

Editorial

Going to Poland Street means going to the centre of London. You are somewhere near Oxford Street and Regent Street and but a few miles away from a huge park, whether you walk west or north or south. Sounds expensive, doesn't it? It sure is! And guess who is paying for it! Looking at a map of London this is not such an unusual situation; it is the norm and the same seems to be true for other towns in England and abroad (just look at Manhattan). There goes a rumour that these parks are among the good things in life that are for free. That they are not for free should be immediately clear - ratepayers have to finance them, whether they want them or not. They are not even free for tourists, for some of the rates that hotels pay are used for the upkeep of the parks and these rates are passed on to the tourist in the price for their room. The same is true for restaurants and souvenir shops. Some of the tourists and some of the residents like the parks; they do not mind paying and there is nothing wrong with that. What is wrong, is that those who don't like parks or couldn't care less are also obliged to pay, and that those who do want parks do still not have much of a say in how they want parks or what they want in them. The reason for this is that Parks are not businesses but political ventures in the hands of local councils. Thus you end up in a situation where you have to pay for the park but you are not supposed to feed the squirrels - which you love - so that the flowers - which the council fancies but which you pay for - are protected.

Somehow this doesn't sound right. If you want something you go to a place where they sell it and look around for the best offer and then you buy. You and you alone decide. Parks can be private ventures - they can be financed in several ways, for example by allowing other businesses to sell their goods in them or through subscription by users.

The objection that will be raised no doubt is: "What about poor people then?" The fact is however, that people who are so poor that

they cannot afford a subscription to a park obviously cannot afford to be forced to pay for one through direct rates or taxes, nor through rates or taxes being passed on to them in the prices of goods. By definition half the population is below median income and it is far more difficult for someone, who has only £70.00 a week to give up an extra £5.00 than for someone who has £700.00 a week. Just because a person is not so well off and finds it difficult to manage with his money, others do not have the right to decide for him what his priorities have to be.

And one other thing: from the state that many parks are in, it can be easily deduced that there are too many of them. We urgently need building land for flats so that people can have affordable accommodation. Instead we are keeping a wilderness and a breeding ground for pests in the middle of our cities. Again this hits the lower incomes the hardest. If the councils were to sell the parks we would have achieved several things: Parks would in effect become cheaper because, although there would be fewer of them, these would compete for customers. There would be new building land and living accommodation would become cheaper. Last but not least, people would only have to pay for parks if they chose to do so. Councils would actually make money which they could use for expenditure. This would cut rates and taxes and that would surely not be a bad thing.

Free Life