

Tom Heberlein: Low taxes? We get just what we pay for

- TOM HEBERLEIN | UW-Madison professor emeritus
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I was visiting the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore, a 23-island archipelago in Lake Superior, when I found myself pining for Stockholm, Sweden. Standing on the dock in Bayfield I realized that the 23,000-island Stockholm archipelago is more accessible to me, an American, than my own 23-island national park.

I asked the superintendent of the lakeshore how many boats he had in his fleet.

“Twenty-two,” he said proudly.

“How many take visitors to the islands?” I asked.

“None,” he replied.

None. Apparently, the government needs a small fleet to manage the islands, but providing access to Americans — that is not their job. There is no free ride across the strait, or a \$10 shuttle between the islands, as there would be in Sweden where a subsidized ferry system makes the Stockholm archipelago available to all.

Americans would rather have inaccessibility to public places and crumbling infrastructure than pay more in taxes, right? Every American seems to know that taxes in Sweden are high and that they want nothing to do with high.

Well, I’m here to tell you: Swedish taxes are not that high. In fact, I pay only 31 percent on my income in Sweden compared to 22 percent in the U.S. But I am happy to pay more, because rather than taking away opportunities for a better life, Swedish taxes expand them.

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In Sweden, college is free and students get a housing stipend. A colleague's daughter just completed a five-year dental program. Her family paid nothing for her education (already paid by their "high" taxes). The Swedish government gave Kerstin \$340 a month to live on when she was in school and the right to borrow another \$850. After five years, she graduated with a debt of \$37,000. The average U.S. dentist is about \$250,000 in debt just from dental school alone.

David Brooks, in a New York Times column, argues that the high taxes Europeans pay would "weaken the ability of members of the middle class to make choices about their own lives."

Maybe Brooks needs to live abroad. Tax dollars are not burned up in a fire — they are used to provide collective goods beyond the reach of any individual and that benefit everyone. These collective goods give the middle class more, not fewer, choices. For example, no matter how rich Bill Gates is, he cannot "buy" a hiking trail system in Seattle like those we take for granted in Stockholm.

Transportation is another low-tax casualty. Living in Lodi, Wisconsin, I am free to travel to Madison however and whenever I want — as long as it is by private automobile. There is no bus service to Madison. Even though railroad tracks run right through the village, there is no commuter rail service either. If this were a suburb of Stockholm or any other European city of 250,000, there would be train service and bus service several times an hour.

If we value freedom, those of us who drive cars should pay higher gas taxes so that those who are old, infirm, too poor to have a car, or want reduce their environmental impact can have fast and efficient bus and train service. Besides the moral issue of providing freedom of choice there is a great economic value. If Lodi had bus and train service to Madison, the value of all of the real estate in the community would shoot up, and our crumbling downtown would have a shot at the future

Am I crippled by Swedish taxes? Nope. Appreciate the benefits? You betcha.

Tom Heberlein divides his time between Wisconsin and Sweden, where he is working on a book "Falling in Love With Sweden (One Mistake at a Time)." A Portage native, he is a professor emeritus at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Share your opinion on this topic by sending a letter to the editor to tctvoice@madison.com. Include your full name, hometown and phone number. Your name and town will be published. The phone number is for verification purposes only. Please keep your letter to 250 words or less.