

# This Description of Medieval London Might Make You More Thankful for Government Intervention!

Many subscribers to Intellectual Takeout are of a libertarian persuasion, and would like to see less government intervention in citizens' affairs. Understandably so. After all, as you can see from the chart below, the number of government regulations has been increasing for some time now:



However, what most libertarians are seeking is not the eradication of government intervention, but the restoration of balance. There are times when libertarians are more than happy for the government to rightfully intervene for the sake of the common good.

I was reminded of this when reading Ian Mortimer's [\*The Time Traveler's Guide to Medieval England\*](#) the other night. In the first chapter, it provides this description of the conditions of London in the first part of the fourteenth century:

*"London, like every city, is a place of huge contrasts. The streets—even the main ones—have tubs of putrid water positioned here and there, supposedly in case of fire but more often than not full of decaying rubbish... The stench and obstruction of the animal dung, vegetable rubbish, fish remains, and entrails of beasts present problems of public sanitation on a scale unmatched by any other town in England. With forty thousand permanent citizens and sometimes as many as one hundred thousand mouths to feed and bowels to evacuate, it is impossible for a city with no sewage system to cope. You will see rats everywhere. The place is infested*

*with them. Such is the level of detritus, especially in the town ditches, that it is also infested with dogs and pigs. There are frequent attempts to eradicate the wild pig population, but each one bears testimony to the failure of the previous effort. If you cannot get rid of the pigs, what hope is there for eradicating the rats?"*



Sounds awful, huh? Fortunately...

*"The state of London does improve. This is largely due to the efforts of successive mayors and aldermen to clean up the streets. The first step is the establishment of a mechanism for appointing official swine killers, who are paid 4d for each pig they remove. In 1309 punitive fines are levied on those who leave human or animal excrement in the streets and lanes: 40d for a first offence, 80d for a second. In 1310 tailors and pelterers are forbidden from scouring furs in the main streets during daylight hours, on penalty of imprisonment. The following year the flaying of dead horses is prohibited within the city walls. From 1357 there are rules against leaving dung, crates, and empty barrels lying by the doors of houses, and against throwing rubbish into the Thames and the Fleet, the latter river being almost completely blocked. In 1371 all slaughtering of large beasts (including sheep) within the city is prohibited; henceforth they must be taken to Stratford Bow or Knightsbridge to be killed. Finally, the passing of the Statute of Cambridge in 1388 makes anyone who throws "dung, garbage, entrails and other ordure" into ditches, ponds, lakes, and rivers liable to pay a fine of £20 to the king. With that legislation, the idea of parliamentary responsibility for public hygiene has finally arrived, and—in London's case especially—not before time."*

It's always best when human beings can be moved toward action through exhortation. However, human nature being what it is,

sometimes punitive measures are necessary. Sometimes, the government needs to intervene.