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“72,000 years ago, our ancestors realised that engineering changes the odds”

The “news” from 72,000 years ago is that Stone Age people used heat treatment to harden and sharpen their early tools and were perhaps the first “engineers”. That isn’t a surprise to those of us who see engineering, in its broad definition as the use of materials and physical laws to enhance our natural capabilities, as the thing that distinguishes our species from others.

But it might be news to some of our politicians and financial people who still don’t seem to get the idea that engineering is fundamental and is necessary as a wealth creator and as the only way we’re ever going to be able to do more with less.

A quick trip over to the US suggests that we’re not alone on this side of the Atlantic in wondering how so many people could have been misled into thinking financial dabbling was a viable substitute. They’re as baffled in US engineering circles as we are as to how we got into this position, and as fed up as our readers seem to be over

the apparent resumption of some of the less acceptable aspects.

But there are some crucial differences there as well. You may not approve of direct intervention by politicians, but you might also feel that, if it’s going to be done, then it were better that it were done wholeheartedly. The US is a bit behind other parts of the globe on battery technology for new, green vehicles. So, clunk, there lands a huge great \$2.4 billion dollop of direct aid for existing firms and new players. The Americans aren’t going to be behind on this for long, you feel.

Over here, there is intervention, but there’s a suspicion that it’s more about bolstering existing sectors, and is played very much within the rules. It’s not really game-changing.

Just 72,000 years ago, our ancestors realised that a bit of engineering changed the odds in the battle against the sabre-toothed tiger and the latest Ice Age. The problem may have changed. But the answer remains the same.

John Pullin, Editor