

LIBERTY VERSUS DEMOCRACY

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It was announced yesterday (as I write this) that Britain is to have a general election on June 9th 1983. My purpose here is not to alter the result of this event; by the time you read this the chances are that it will all be over. My intention rather is to answer certain questions about libertarianism that this election is bound to encourage. How will libertarians vote? Will any of us be standing as candidates? If not which of the other parties do we prefer? Will libertarians be instructed to vote for any particular one? Have we managed to sneak any of our members into the candidate list of the other parties, a la Militant Tendency?

In order to understand the answers to these questions it is necessary to know a little about what I here mean by libertarianism. The introductory leaflet of the Libertarian Alliance lists the Alliance's principles as follows: "the right of all persons to life, liberty and justly acquired property; the voluntary exchange of all goods and services; each individual's liberty to pursue his or her chosen lifestyle and to promote it by peaceful persuasion, but not to impose it forcibly on anyone else; elimination of coercive intervention by the state, the foremost violator of liberty." Later in the same leaflet there occur the following words: "Conservative, Labour and Liberal Parties stand for the present corporate state. All of them advocate increasing government regulation and harassment of the people on behalf of organised interest groups." There are many whose first reaction to these opinions is to denounce them as contradictory. Any group evil enough to believe in "justly acquired property" is plainly a collection of reactionary Thatcherite monsters.

FREE MARKET CONSERVATIVES

There is some truth in this charge, loth though many libertarians are to admit it. There is now a type of Tory free market radical who does indeed say some things that libertarians strongly agree with. Sometimes Mrs Thatcher herself says something good.

(Pointing out that Mrs Thatcher holds a certain opinion is not the same thing as proving it wrong.) Better yet, Mrs Thatcher has occasionally even done things that libertarians have applauded, as when she suspended exchange controls. If she showed any sign of meaning what she says about cutting taxation libertarians would applaud that as well, because all libertarians want taxation cut and many of us want it abolished entirely.

But Tories are always careful to moderate their anti-state rhetoric, and for good reasons. Civil servants are paid out of taxation, but so is Mrs Thatcher. So ought she to be denationalised too, and if not why not? If medical services are better when supplied on the free market, might not the same be true for defence services also? (This point has already been made in a recent letter to the *Guardian*.) If state intervention in the affairs of businesses is wrong, why is it suddenly right for the state to plunge headlong into the internal affairs of trade unions, as Mr Norman Tebbit says it should? (Again, see the correspondence columns of the *Guardian* for this debate.)

And besides, is all this talk of freedom really anything more than that? The free market is the institutional precondition for the small businesses of the future to topple the big businesses of the present. So can the Conservative Party, bankrolled by big business, be relied upon to give active support to such a thing? Many libertarians utterly detest the Conservatives, and all the more so because they use, and thus discredit, libertarian rhetoric. Many American libertarians feel just the same about the Republicans.

A LIBERTARIAN PARTY?

So why not form our own party? As a long term strategy, we could try to split the Conservative patty, joining forces with those Conservatives who really do believe in freedom and the free market, and vigorously opposing those who merely say and do whatever will keep them in power. Present rumours about the forthcoming collapse of the Labour Party are in my opinion greatly exaggerated, but if Labour did collapse then indeed something very like the old Whig versus Tory two party split could reemerge.

But libertarian reservations about voting Conservative, or for that matter about voting "libertarian", are far more fundamental than mere worries about policy and about whether the candidates mean what they say.

Very few people oppose either freedom or democracy on principle, or not in public, and thus the two words regularly occur together in lists of good things which good people are sworn to defend. As a result the words are often used as if they both



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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

meant the same thing: freedom and democracy. Yet it must be insisted that insofar as the two words still have any meaning at all, they refer to two absolutely distinct principles, and that these two principles often conflict with each other.

Suppose that people were forbidden to buy purple cars, merely because most people prefer cars more tastefully decorated. Crazy. Yet there are already in Britain laws just like this.

Consider cannabis. Even though there exists in Britain a substantial minority of people who like to smoke cannabis, doing this is nevertheless illegal. Now when cannabis smokers are set upon by the police their freedom is being violated, despite the fact that they are harming no-one else and according to many not even themselves. Nevertheless the decision, regularly confirmed by parliament, that cannabis should remain illegal is impeccably democratic. Libertarians hold that this law is wrong. Democratic, but wrong.

Not all democratic decisions are a violation of freedom. If a group of people gather together for some shared purpose, and agree beforehand that any disputes about tactics will be resolved by a show of hands, fair enough, especially if extreme dissidents are simply allowed to leave the group. But general elections are not like this. If the next government is not to my taste I could leave the country, and whereas I wouldn't call this consumer sovereignty running riot, it is nevertheless a choice well worth having, and would be even better if getting into other semi-decently governed countries were as easy as getting out of this one. But short of me emigrating there is otherwise no way for me to resist whatever democratic decisions this government might make. The more democratic these decisions are, should I fall foul of them, the worse it will be for me. Majorities are certainly not automatically moral, and often thoroughly immoral.

It is enough for many libertarians that participating in electoral politics is for them a gigantic waste of time and energy, and that the same time and energy devoted to other persuasive activities would be vastly more productive. Winning elections means appealing to opinions that people already hold, and our purpose is to change these opinions. But the case against a "libertarian political party", as in fact exists in America (it polled a million votes in the last presidential election), doesn't end there. As many critics of the American libertarian party have pointed out there is something very odd about a bunch of people all desperately trying to get jobs that they don't think should exist. Suppose these libertarians "win", and get one of these jobs. What then? Why, they will cut taxation. But what of the taxation that will inevitably remain? Should this in the meantime still be collected? And by force? These same triumphant libertarians will have been busily spreading the idea that taxation is wrong and should cease, and this will surely encourage some taxpayers to take them at their word and refuse to pay. Whichever side of the barricades these libertarian office holders then stand, someone will have been swindled. Some thoughtful libertarians do nevertheless adopt the electoral tactic, just as others become civil servants or accept regular welfare payments, but none of them should regard this as anything but a serious compromise, and many think it utterly dishonest and thus, in propaganda terms, disastrous.

THE REAL CASE FOR DEMOCRACY

Meanwhile, most people are not libertarians, and are in favour of democracy, simply because it is ... well, democratic. So rarely are people challenged to defend democracy, by showing how it leads to other things (apart from itself) that are genuinely desirable, that the real case for democracy is seldom stated.

The case for democracy can be summarised simply: it is preferable to civil war. The result of the "electoral battle" (the language of democracy is relentlessly military) is usually the

same as it would have been had the battle been in earnest, which means that the losers tend to accept the verdict, and peace reigns. It doesn't always work. In tribally divided societies elections degenerate into population censuses, and their is neither the hope of attracting support from the other tribe nor the fear of losing it from your own. The recent Zimbabwe election illustrates both these tendencies at work. At first the crushing electoral victory of the Mugabe tribe persuaded the Nkomo tribe that a civil war would be pointless. But then the behaviour of the Mugabe tribe caused the Nkomo tribe to change its mind. Democracy only works in a relatively undivided society like Britain (provided that Britain doesn't include Northern Ireland, where democracy is causing chaos of almost African proportions).

But look at the above political problems in another way. Why fight a civil war in the first place? Answer: to get control of the government. Therefore, the more power this government wields in relation to society as a whole, the more of a motive there is for a civil war, and the more democracy is necessary as a bloodless substitute. Libertarians reject the principle of democracy, because we reject the very idea that there should be this government imposing itself upon society in the first place. Or to put the same point differently we believe in government only between genuinely consenting people, who really have agreed to a "social contract" instead of merely having had one dumped fictionally on top of them by word twisting political theorists. We still use democratic institutions for our own tactical purposes, just as some socialists find it advantageous to become millionaire capitalists. We regularly supply speakers for meetings arranged by political activists. But we don't believe in democracy for its own sake.

Nor, lest there be any misunderstanding, do libertarians (or none that I know of) believe in challenging democratic institutions with violence.

Most of us have nothing but contempt for those crackpot anarchist cliques who are only able to communicate with explosions. Our aim is persuasion, not destruction. Our purpose is to undermine the intellectual case for the state, and what better justification for the state could there be than gangs of lunatics letting off bombs? Such madness strengthens the very tyranny it claims to be opposing. If by some amazing fluke we did smash democracy we would undoubtedly, in the present state of political opinion, let in a gang of tyrants far worse than our present parliamentary plunderers.

We regard democracy as just another arrogant monarch, better than some, worse than others, sometimes to be allied with, sometimes to be attacked, but never to be regarded as the fountain of all wisdom. Times may change, as when Germany's King Democracy threw up Adolf Hitler. But, for the moment the old tyrant is quite willing to listen to anyone who talks amusingly or interestingly enough, so that's what we are attempting to do. (Even when brutal tyranny does reign, words are often a better bet than bombs. The more intelligent oppositionists in the USSR certainly think so.)

THE DEMOCRATIC ERROR IS NOT NEW

Britain's nineteenth century liberals made this same fatal error, of assuming that King Democracy, if they could but install him on the throne, would automatically be on their side. They observed that liberty was in the interests of the masses, but neglected to convince the masses of this truth. They simply assumed that universal suffrage would automatically further the cause of liberty, and worse, making just the same mistake as is made now, they confused the two objectives. We have yet to recover.

They made the same error with nationalism, which is another, even bloodier, story.