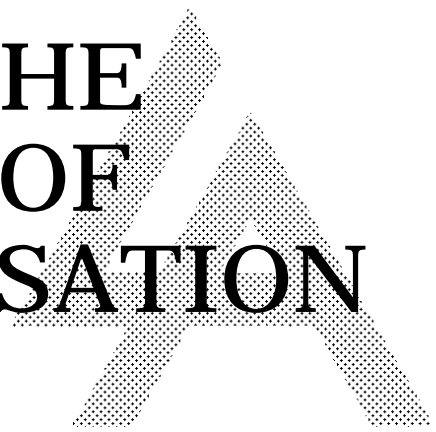


# FREEDOM AND THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF WESTERN CIVILISATION

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I not only love freedom, but I glory in Western civilisation. Those few years in which I have participated in the life of a small part of that civilisation have been absorbing and thrilling beyond measure.

Achievements are those aspects of a civilisation which realise or give effect to values that you or I believe are worthwhile or good, or in which some pride can, in our view, be legitimately expressed. Achievements for me are facets of our civilisation which advance human dignity, spiritual strength, the possibility of wise judgement and expanded awareness of the nature of man and his place in the universe. There are many such achievements, and there is far too little acknowledgement of them - in my view - in the present day. Our civilisation will die unless we believe in it, and we will not believe in it unless we recognise that there have been magnificent accomplishments and that we are justified in feeling pride in them and teaching our children to feel pride in them also. Our pride in what has been gained should not stop us seeking even greater achievements, and one of the virtues of freedom is that its realisation will ensure that opportunities for improvement will always be being brought to notice. This is a point made by John Milton and John Stuart Mill in defence of liberty and remains as valid as ever. Freedom will ever punish the self-satisfied and the complacent.

What distinguishes Western civilisation from other civilisations? Certainly each of the great civilisations has, by that very description, achievements which are acknowledged in our own time.

It is not only Western civilisation which has brought forth extraordinary spiritual, artistic or technical accomplishment. Civilisations we would not call free have left us cultural advances which we still admire. The scientific and technical achievements of the Arabs or the Chinese, the philosophies and temples of Mohammedanism, Buddhism, Hinduism, the calendric achievements of the Maya in central America, must all be acknowledged. Western civilisation is distinguished by some unique achievements, but more than that, by the few centuries of tremendous creativity and innovation in which we are still living. A thousand years ago there was little especially remarkable about the West. Marco Polo was impressed with the civilisation he found in China. It is the last few

centuries which distinguish the West and which have given it such a profound influence on world history.

Wherever one looks I find it impossible not to be impressed by the creativity of our civilisation. I have always found the range of instruments in the Western orchestra an extraordinary example of the sophistication which may be achieved when tradition does not have the power to prohibit change. From the lyre to the Moog synthesiser which captures the very sounds of the waves and the wind, Western music, and its great compositions, are a cultural advance of surpassing quality. The literature of the last three and a half centuries has explored every facet of human experience in poetry and prose, novel, short story and play, and combined with the technology of recording, film and video have given Western arts a dominant impact on the culture of all the peoples of the world.

The developments in artistic expression, however one assesses them, are transcended by the huge expansion in man's knowledge of the world, the place of his world in the universe, and of himself, and the application of this knowledge in medicine, in urban design, in food production, in exploration, in energy production, in communication, in the management of our planetary environment and in the advance into space. That this growth in knowledge has improved beyond measure the lives of countless millions of this planet's inhabitants is undoubted - though knowledge alone is far from being enough to ensure that relations between people will become more humane and civilised.

## SCIENTIFIC THOUGHT

At the basis of these developments was a remarkable cultural development which occurred several centuries ago - the discovery of the scientific mode of thought. No previous civilisation had been able to make a lasting cultural breakthrough to empirical scientific thought: not the Egyptians, the Greeks, the Arabs, the Romans, the Chinese, nor the Mogul empire of India. The breakthrough was the realisation that it was possible to increase human knowledge about the world and about human society by investigating the world empirically, and accumulating evidence in favour of, and against, propositions. Particularly from Bacon onwards the development of the scientific mode of thought challenged institutional ideologies and in particular the ideological control by church and state of the content of culture. It led to the rise of institutions committed to rationality - to the royal societies and the scientific professions - and to the technological achievements which are still pouring upon us today and continually transforming our way of life.

If the scientific mode of thought is one of the greatest of the cultural achievements of Western civilisation, we should also recognise that the consequences of this rationality have not been confined to knowledge about the physical world. They extend to knowledge about human society.

It is fashionable to denigrate the achievements of the social sciences, yet the attempt to provide a rational analysis of the work-

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ings of society, including the place of irrationality in human affairs, has had extraordinary consequences for Western civilisation. From the seventeenth and eighteenth century analyses of the constitutional arrangements which might be used to check tyrannical power, Western civilisation has been profoundly altered by the works of social philosophers and theorists. It is fitting to acknowledge here the role of the theorist who has possibly had the most profound effect on the organisation of human society in the last two centuries: Adam Smith. Smith analysed an aspect of human society whose significance had been largely overlooked in the whole preceding history of mankind: the beneficial social consequences of exchange as a means of co-ordinating human activity. Smith showed that for a society of people with a diversity of values there could be a mutually beneficial increase in values through exchanges, and that this principle could be applied to the organisation of productive and trading activity in national, and between national societies. In the two hundred years since Smith wrote, the application of his principle of social and economic organisation has led to an explosion in the production and achievement of human values without parallel in the whole of preceding history.

Each of these developments - in the arts, and in the results of scientific advance - has to do with the nature and use of knowledge in society, and it is here that we come to the fundamental reason why freedom is integrally linked to the achievements of our civilisation. It is because freedom greatly increases the use that may be made of the knowledge of people in a society.

### FREEDOM AND KNOWLEDGE

The achievements I have mentioned are all related to the creation, publication, and application of knowledge: knowledge of techniques, knowledge of natural and social laws, and knowledge of the varieties of human experience - the scientist's knowledge, the musician's knowledge, the artist's knowledge, the novelist's knowledge and so forth. The reason why freedom is linked to these achievements is because freedom not only increases the likelihood that the serendipitous insights leading to new knowledge will occur, but that there will be opportunities for that knowledge to be developed, applied and broadcasted to the world.

By freedom I mean the degree of autonomy or independence from others in the taking of decisions. The degree of autonomy or independence enjoyed by a person is a matter of degree. There is always some freedom, however limited, so long as a person remains an entity with the capacity to take some independent decisions - even in a prison or a concentration camp, but in such cases the area of autonomy is so small that it may not even relate to the basic physical functions. In the West we have come to take for granted a very wide range of decisions in which we have considerable independence: what to say, whom to associate with, what to read or view, what to work at and whom to work for, where to live, when and how to travel, whom to marry, what to teach one's children and how to raise them. In each of these decisions we do not operate without any constraint at all: social norms, laws (legal and moral) restrain us, but in our civilisation these constraints are less oppressive and probably less felt than in almost any other civilisation in human history. There are many societies in the world where such a degree of freedom can nowhere be taken for granted.

The modern thinker who has done most to spread awareness of the relation between freedom and the capacity of a civilisation to make use of the knowledge of its people is Friedrich Hayek. I first came across Hayek's argument in the chapter in his book *The Constitution of Liberty* entitled 'The Creative Powers of a Free Civilisation'.<sup>1</sup>

Without a substantial independence of decision, the unique knowledge of each person, derived from the unique experience of each person, can never be effectively utilised. One of the enormous virtues of the relationship of exchange analysed by Smith is that it enables each party to the exchange to use the knowledge he has, and provides incentives for them to use that knowledge in a way which improves the value position of both parties.

There is sometimes a belief that the knowledge of people - of businessmen, of consumers, of voters - can be gathered together in vast data banks and made available to governments or other authoritative decision-makers who will then be in a position to make decisions on behalf of others. While it is undoubtedly true that modern information-retrieval systems can make massive amounts of information available to a few decision-makers, it is less well understood that there are certain kinds of information, vital to a civilisation, which can never be centralised in this way - that can never be accessible to central authorities. And further, that this uncentralisable information is not trivial - on the contrary it is of critical importance to the functioning of a social order. It includes information derived from the unique experience of each person and about the value priorities of individual people. Knowledge about these priorities can never be effectively centralised because they are not known until an actual decision is faced. Exchange carried on through an efficient pricing system registers these priorities, recorded at the moment of decision. They are lost when a few decision-makers seek to take decisions on behalf of others. And the consequence of losing them is a failure adequately to register in social arrangements the priorities which are important to people. This is not just inefficient. It can become a danger to the social order and it is fundamental to the discontent of people under tyranny.

### AUTHORITY, FREEDOM AND KNOWLEDGE

The effective use of this information can be inhibited by social rules, or laws and regulations which rigidly impose certain kinds of behaviour. If we look at each of the areas of achievement of our civilisation I have mentioned we will find at some critical historical moment a conflict: generally a conflict between an individual and an institution - a conflict concerning the extent to which the individual is to have the independence to take a decision to develop, apply or promulgate some knowledge that he has. We think of Luther or Galileo before the Church inquisitors; of Pasteur or Freud before the medical profession of their day; of Milton or Solzhenitsyn before the government censors; of Thomas Jefferson and the government of George III. In the commercial world we can find innumerable examples in Australia of those opponents of monopoly whose right to trade or to act freely has been obstructed: Gordon Barton of IPEC, Leon Laidley the petrol distributor, or Penhaloric the shopkeeper resisting trading hours legislation.

In each such instance the issue has been whether an individual person is to be allowed to take a peaceful decision which seems to that person appropriate in the light of his values and knowledge, or whether he must submit to the decision of some authority. As individuals are prevented from acting in the light of their own values and knowledge by the exercise of authority or power over them, significant losses may be incurred by the society as a whole: not only losses of economic efficiency leading to stagnation and the restriction of opportunity but reductions in levels of satisfaction by the individual persons making up the society, as their values are not expressed and their experience ignored or suppressed.

Even a superficial reference to this history of individuals seeking independence of decision tells us that threats to individual freedom may come from any authority: from family, church, trade union, business organisation or government. Each claims to exercise authority within a certain sphere and within that sphere each may use authority to reduce the independent decision-making of those subordinate to it. Authority freely accepted may not be experienced as too onerous a restriction on freedom, but any authority, any organisation, to some extent may encroach on freedom. Those at the pinnacle of great authority systems - a Pharaoh, the head of a research institute, the leader of a great union - may experience considerable freedom and be able to achieve the commitment of great resources - but will only use a fraction of the knowledge of subordinates in decisions and reflect only some of their values.

In assessing the contribution of freedom to our civilisation we need to recognise that the desire for freedom expresses one side of a tension which is inherent in the human condition - a tension

which is always present and can never be resolved. The tension is inherent in the existence of individuals as decision-takers - but decision-takers dependent on others to realise their values. In society we seek to influence others while retaining our own capacity to decide. As all are engaged in the pursuit of some degree of control or influence over their neighbours and in making their decisions stick, each also feel pressure on his independence or autonomy. Our desire for freedom expresses the wish to achieve our own values and not become purely the instruments of others. But we all also seek a degree of control over others - even if only persuading them to a point of view - and it behoves the believer in freedom not to ignore or minimise this aspect of human affairs.

### **AUTHORITY AND THE INDIVIDUAL**

When we talk of freedom we generally have in mind the freedom of the individual to decide according to his or her own values and beliefs and knowledge. In the classical liberal view we have in mind the independent citizen, farmer, entrepreneur, parent, writer, philosopher stating and acting out his own beliefs and values.

In the century since Mill wrote *On Liberty* our view of man has changed beyond recognition, and the implications of this change have yet to be adequately dealt with in liberal theory. The autonomous individual has become social man: a person whose very identity is the set of identifications he has with the authorities and other groupings of his environment: family, school, church, political party, state and nation - and whose conscience (or lack of it) is the product of the learnt values acquired during his social experience. And in the aftermath of Nuremberg and Vietnam social-psychological research tells us that for substantial aspects of our lives we do not act as autonomous individuals at all. We surrender our own decisions to the decisions of those in authority - we become agents, components of larger structures: of armies, of commercial enterprises, of government departments, of trade unions, of universities, of newspapers. The mob mind, the crowd as creature, is known to us through history. In our day, the institutional and organisational mind is a reality that has become inescapable as the number of organisations and the organisational directives compete with and often replace or put in abeyance individual moral codes.

### **THE PARADOX OF AUTHORITY**

Here is one of the great paradoxes of our civilisation: as freedom has grown so has the range, the size and the capacities of the authorities we use to achieve our objectives, and while subject to authority the individual's autonomy, within the limits of authority, is surrendered. Human beings do not just act as individuals but as components of giant structures in specialised roles, governed by the rules, expectations and restrictions of organisation.

Many of the achievements of our civilisation are the work of the great private and public structures of authority which liberal democracy has fostered. The mass produced motor car, the transistor and the personal computer, the moon rocket, old age pensions and peaceful political change are all possible because human beings can work in very large organisations as well as in their individual capacity. We cannot do without authority, because it is one of our most potent means for co-ordinating large numbers of people to achieve our values. Freedom to establish authorities has often been seen as a basic human right - we call it freedom of association, or freedom of enterprise - yet within authorities independence and autonomy is reduced and the costs of the inevitable losses of information and initiative are felt.

Many of the loudest voices now purporting to speak on behalf of freedom are not individuals at all: they are institutions. Well, of course, they are the individuals who hold the leadership roles in those institutions but the song they sing is an institutional song, sung by their predecessors as it will be by their successors. Large companies ask for freedom of enterprise; large unions for freedom of association; large media organisations for freedom of the press and freedom of speech; churches and faiths for freedom of religion. They join states of the federation asking for freedom to act within their constitutional prerogatives; courts defending the inde-

pendence of the judiciary, government departments seeking freedom from political interference, and parliament itself defending its privilege to be free from outside interference. We can support these demands - to a point - because they are part of the process by which authorities check each other - but each of these authorities not only seeks authority for itself - it also seeks control over other authorities and over individuals, to reduce the uncertainties in its institutional environment.

### **THE INSTITUTIONAL STRUGGLE**

As defenders of a civilisation built on substantial freedom we are increasingly and uncomfortably aware that there is a battle raging in our civilisation. It is not a battle between individuals so much as a battle between institutions. These institutions elicit loyalties and passions. In the past these institutions were governmental and religious: kings and parliaments, churches and armies and courts. And when they fought, civil war resulted. The liberal movement in the last century has created the conditions for the emergence of a set of large private organisations and these private institutions are also engaged in a struggle, each seeking to defend or expand both its own independence and its influence and control over others. The BLF battles with the building contractors; the medical residents battle with an economy minded Minister; the universities and the colleges battle with each other and with governments, both state and federal, to define their areas of freedom. At the centre of it all the government agencies - better placed to work for the same objectives - seek to reduce their uncertainties too, by extending their control.

Unlike individual conflicts these great institutional conflicts are usually slow moving and often hidden. We might easily miss them - except when they result in strikes or demonstrations - and awareness of them is low, yet they are a fundamentally important part of our present day reality and only when we identify them and understand them can we hope to deal with some of the dilemmas faced today by those who value freedom. While demanding freedom and independence for themselves, these institutions can restrict individual freedom, and we can lose the strength, resilience and creativity which individual freedom gives to our civilisation.

The principal threats to individual freedom are now, as always, the attempts by organisations and institutions to control their own environments and reduce uncertainties, often arising from the market, and especially the attempts of private institutions to use public authority to achieve these ends. Public authorities are of course engaged in this endeavour with an equal fervour, and with a scope of authority and resources that far exceed those available to private organisations.

A major source of these uncertainties arises from the decisions of leaders in other institutions. Arrangements which resolve conflicts between institutional leaders, either as a result of a bargain, or on the terms of the most powerful of the institutions involved, frequently inhibit the freedom of individuals and other institutional leaders. Wage agreements, legal trading hours, pricing agreements, market sharing, product content controls, production quotas and restrictions on marketing, restrictive practices of all kinds (often endorsed by government), statutory monopolies and exclusive trading arrangements, occupational licensing - all are examples of restrictions on freedom of enterprise which are frequently designed to favour one set of existing business interests, of whom there has been a rapid increase in number in the last decade: consumer, environmental, tenants, conservation, medical and health interests being the obvious ones.

### **THE MULTIPLYING RESTRICTIONS ON FREEDOM**

If we picture a society in which institutional leaders are continually brought into competition and conflict in the effort to control their environment and secure their own institutional success, and we picture a continuing process of resolution of these conflicts by agreements, bargains, deals, rules and induced interventions by government, we would expect to experience a society in which the network of rules and regulations and restrictive arrangements is

constantly increasing. And this is indeed the picture of Western civilisation that emerges.

Both the trend and important aspects of the process were identified by one of the greatest political and social theorists of the nineteenth century, Alexis de Tocqueville, in his famous work *Democracy in America*.

De Tocqueville saw clearly that it was the attempts of individuals and organisations to reduce the uncertainties they faced, especially by the use of public authority, that was one of the greatest forces tending to erode freedom. His explanation of the growth of government regulation as a response to the demands of private interests precedes by over a century the interest theory of regulation used by modern market political economists.

Democratic ages are times of experiment, innovation, and adventure. There are always a lot of men engaged in some difficult or new undertaking which they pursue apart, unencumbered by assistants. Such men will freely admit the general principle that the power of the state should not interfere in private affairs, but as an exception, each one of them wants the state to help in the special matter with which he is preoccupied, and he wants to lead the government on to take action in his domain, though he would like to restrict it in every other direction.

As a multitude of people, all at the same moment, take this particular view about a great variety of different purposes, the sphere of the central government insensibly spreads in every direction, although every individual wants to restrict it. In this way the simple fact of its continuing existence increases the attributes of power of a democratic government. Time works on its side, and every accident is to its profit; the passions of individuals, in spite of themselves, promote it; and one can say that the older a democratic society, the more centralised will its government be.<sup>2</sup>

A century and more before Hayek, de Tocqueville pointed to the dangers of stultification, of stagnation through the destruction of individual motivation and initiative. "I think that extreme centralisation of political power ultimately enervates society and thus, in the end, weakens the government too. But I do not deny that with the power of society thus centralised, great undertakings can be carried through at a given time and for a specific purpose."<sup>3</sup> The socialist states of our time exemplify the truth of this proposition - as regrettably do continuing trends in our own society.

## STRATEGY FOR FREEDOM

The Tocquevillian strategy to check the inexorable extension of the central power in the interests of preserving a degree of individual autonomy includes the independent election of different levels of government; "associations of plain citizens" which, by defending their "private interests against the encroachments of power [save] the common liberties"; a free press; the independent power of the judiciary; strict observance of procedures; strong insistence by the 'friends of liberty' on the protection of private rights from arbitrary power; and the explicit definition of a sphere of private rights free from interference.

De Tocqueville's strategy has proved remarkably effective. Almost all the devices to which he refers have been set in place in our own society and they have undoubtedly served to protect the liberty of the individual. In many respects individualism in decision-making - the elevation of the individual conscience and individual needs - has increased in strength. Yet one of the most important of de Tocqueville's mechanisms, trade unions, churches, societies and associations of all kinds - has itself been invaded by the "central power". The independent private institutions which would check the extension of the "central power" are no longer as independent as they once were. They, like the individual entrepreneurs of de Tocqueville's own day, have succumbed to the temptation to invite government to exercise its power on their own behalf.

What we find today, and what is of such great concern to liberals, is the establishment of a network of dependencies between these supposedly independent institutions, and the centralisation of authority in many spheres of life. We observe governmental pressure for the business sector to become more centralised; for government business and unions to come together in tripartite decision-making. We observe Australia's nineteen universities displaying increasing uniformity under the pressures of a central regulatory force; we find the mass media highly centralised in a nationwide government radio and television network and a regulated commercial sector; we find each of the traditionally independent professions, medicine and to a growing and worrisome extent, law under an expanding centralised regulation; and we find the independent governmental authorities of the states losing decade by decade whatever constitutional autonomy they notionally possess. The judiciary still retains its independence, but that has traditionally been grounded in an independent legal profession. And within each of these spheres we find the continuing advance of that regulation of minute details and decisions which, as de Tocqueville pointed out, is especially enervating to a society.

There is a need for a liberal programme to strengthen those qualities which have given our civilisation its resilience and adaptability, and which have brought forth that creativity of which Hayek speaks.

De Tocqueville, as I have said, placed considerable importance on formal legal restraints on government.

We should lay down extensive but clear and fixed limits to the field of social power. Private people should be given certain rights and the undisputed enjoyment of such rights. The individual should be allowed to keep the little freedom, strength and originality left to him. His position in face of society should be raised and supported. Such I think should be the chief aim of any legislator in the age opening before us.<sup>4</sup>

Those who advocate constitutional limitations on government taxing, spending and regulatory activity may be seen as modern exponents of this strategy. Well conceived rules can be effective in halting - or at least slowing markedly - that historic tendency for links and interdependencies between institutions to grow. They also provide opportunities - and reasons - for the leaders of autonomous institutions to claim a degree of independence. The parliament itself, and even the resistance of the states to centralisation (while faltering on the ambiguity and redefinition of the rules), illustrate the point.

Beyond strengthening the framework of rules which protect freedom, the strategy of the friends of liberty must surely also have an intellectual component - a compelling justification for liberty, which will include reference to its beneficial consequences. And here the friends of liberty have an advantage, for the case is there to be made that liberty is an essential ingredient in providing that degree of equality, material well being, and social harmony that people seek. We can never finally secure "the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity", but we can certainly do more than we have done to strengthen these blessings in our own time.

## NOTES

1. Friedrich Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1960.
2. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. J. P. Mayer, Trans. G. Lawrence, Doubleday Anchor, New York, 1969, p. 672.
3. *Ibid*, p. 677.
4. *Ibid*, p. 701.