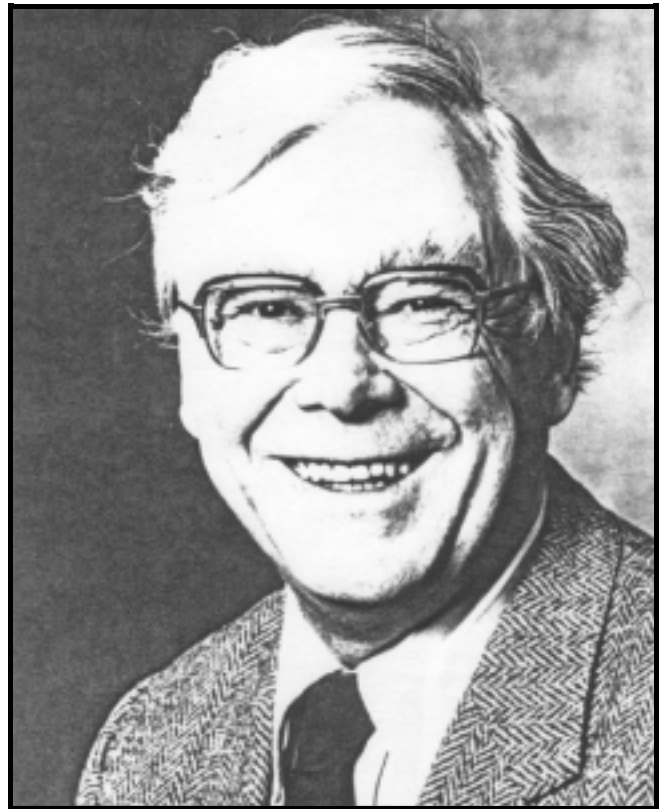


# INDEPENDENCE AND AUTHORITY

**JOHN HIBBS**



Two aspects of my inheritance came together to shape my attitude to public affairs, although neither of them assumed their role in my consciousness until many years after the foundations had been laid down. One was political — the nineteenth century liberal dislike of paternalism — be it that of the Conservative or the Labour Party, or, in today's world, of the Liberals or the SDP. (Still more, that of the Green Party.) The other side of that coin, though, was a long-lasting taste for political activity, as to which, more anon.

The second aspect, which was linked closely with the first, and underpinned it, was an upbringing in the independent tradition of English religious nonconformity. This is not perhaps the occasion to go into the theological arguments (though I have plans for a book on that issue), beyond saying that it no more accepts the authority of hierarchy in the state than it does in the Church. My upbringing in a Congregational atmosphere also left me with a tradition of standing up for your beliefs, that had taken my father to Wormwood Scrubs as a conscientious objector in the First World War.

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## LEFT ORIGINS

Nevertheless I was never in doubt as to my political stance, to the left. On the great issue of my youth — Which side were you on in Spain? — I had no doubts. I remember the sense of shock with which I saw the headline in someone's copy of the *Daily Mail*: "Bombers are beating the Reds". As a pacifist, a nonconformist, and an individualist, the 1930's were difficult times to be growing up in. To be sent in 1940 to a public school 'for the sons of Anglican clergymen and army officers' (where I was very happy, thanks to the tolerance of the English at their best) left me unchanged in my broad range of attitudes.

In the sixth form, many of us called ourselves Socialists. There is much in the saying — I forget its origin: "If a man is not a Socialist before he's twenty, he has no heart; if he's still a Socialist when he's forty, he has no head." Socialism has always seemed to me to be one of man's nobler dreams, sadly unattainable because of human greed — and if you try to achieve it by coercion, you destroy it, at the roots. But the objective of achieving a tolerant, humane and caring society must not be lost if we abandon Socialism as itself unattainable. (I think my emphasis on toleration, itself at the heart of the Independent Congregational theology in which I was reared, was brought to the fore by seeing D. W. Griffiths' film *Intolerance*, shortly after I had left school.)

But wartime work, as a registered conscientious objector, first for the Forestry Commission and then in various hospitals, brought me into contact with radical political thought, first that of Max Ploughman and Hugh I'Anson Faussett, and then with the anarchists. From 1943 I read *War Commentary* regularly, and fan-

ced myself a bit of a rebel. Wilfred Wellock's contrast between an organic and a mechanistic model for society attracted me too, while the flavour of the whole period for me is still to be heard in the music of Tippett's *A Child of Our Time*.

## THE IMPACT OF ECONOMICS

As a student, I found two new contributions that moved me away from the rather sterile politics of anarchism — first the influence of reading Charles Williams, and coming to terms with the truth of feeling as well as thought. Second was the actual study of economics, which quickly undermined any respect I might have had for Marxian theory when I realised that Marxian economics departed from the mainstream of development shortly before the great breakthrough of marginal utility theory. I went back to Bakunin for some radical alternative, but found little to build on which fitted the world around me.

Going into business, as personal assistant to the Managing Director of a medium sized bus and coach company, made me realise the basic inadequacy of the labour theory of value in describing social reality, though I did not then question the regulatory powers of the state. Avid for political involvement, I joined the Liberals in my local constituency, and had my first experience of canvassing in the General Election of 1955. By then I was on the committee of my local Liberal Association (happily, for me, including the word "Radical" in its title). But the development of my thought took its greatest shift when I went to the London School of Economics from 1952 to 1954 to study the system of licensing bus and coach services, where I radically altered my attitude to state control.

Gilbert Ponsonby, who was my supervisor and remained my friend until his death thirty years later, taught us in the postgraduate seminar a form of economics that I now recognise as having the imprint of his colleague Friedrich Hayek. Under his supervision I studied the system for licensing (regulating) bus and coach services, and concluded that it was against the interests of the consumer and therefore of the industry also; a view that I still maintain — indeed, the ineptitude of management in the current process of deregulation (itself based upon my Hobart Papers of 1963 and 1982) seems to me to be due largely to fifty years of protectionism under the Road Traffic Act of 1930.

I remained active in the Liberal Party, increasingly after joining British Railways in 1961, and then in my early years in further education. I found that my committee in the local constituency (where I was from time to time Vice-Chairman, Chairman, President and Election Agent) shared my views as to the independence of the local association, and we resisted attempts on the part of the Party's central organisation to dictate tactics to us. This may have contributed to our success, when in 1970, with a first-rate radical can-

didate, we bucked the national trend, and saw the vote swing our way.

My disillusion with all party politics stemmed from several things that happened in the following ten years. Chief among them was the refusal of the Party to contemplate a market for transport — reflecting the politicians' irreversible desire to manage others, and to meddle with business that doesn't concern them. Then came the cynical transfer of the constituency, after I had left, to the SDP, who failed to build on the vote, and then abandoned the seat — a shocking reward for all the work put in by constituency workers who believed in the liberal and radical principles that I shared with them. The ruthlessness of the politician bent on success is not pretty, and it is not restricted to any one party.

## ANARCHISM AND ECONOMICS

Yet politically, anarchism has not attracted me for many years now — there's the old story about the man at an anarchist meeting banging the table and calling out: "Disorder, please, ladies and gentlemen." It all seems to me remote from the world of business that I know, where in a contestable market the pressure is always towards the satisfaction of the consumer, not the provision of what someone else thinks the consumer ought to have. (The paternalism of the Green Party sickens me.) I have too great a respect for people, the consequence of my independent background.

To such a position, the discovery of neo-Austrian economics and the social analysis of Hayek provided me in the last few years with a bit of firm ground upon which to stand. It has left me where I started, with the firm conviction that society's formal structure should be from the base up, not the top down. Independent units, small enough for them to function as social groups, should be the source of authority - not Bishops or Council Leaders, or Managing Directors responsible to no one. The independent tradition of English nonconformity (tragically abandoned when the leading Congregationalists formed the United Reformed Church) should be one model. The old Liberal Party that was a federation of local and independent associations should be another. And the industrial structures of the Mondragon companies should be the third. Anything larger, anything with a top-down hierarchy of authority, is not only anti-human, but downright inefficient. Authority breeds complacency, and it encourages intolerance. When people are busy doing what they want and earning their living by it, in a market which directs their activities to the satisfaction of others, they have no time for either. That way lies true freedom; what we have in Britain today is not far off tyranny — and the tyranny of the well-intentioned is not to be preferred to liberty, toleration and the evolution of a society of mutual trust.