



WHY I AM A LIBERTARIAN AND HOW I BECAME ONE

TOM BURROUGHES

I am 26 years old and a staff journalist working for a paper in East Anglia. At the moment I am probably one of very few staff reporters on a daily paper who would call himself a libertarian, let alone an anarcho-capitalist, which gives me a certain rarity value which will, I hope, decline fast as other comrades enter the trade.¹

How and why did I come to hold the views I do? That is a complex question but I believe it is worth answering because a short account of my own intellectual journey could shed a little light on libertarianism in general. It is also a good mental exercise to go right back and see how my ideas have developed to the present day. It may even indicate how my ideas might develop in the future.

EARLY DAYS AND BACKGROUND

I was born in a small market town in Suffolk and raised on my parents' arable farm of about 320 acres, which is currently profitable thanks to my father's business acumen and the largesse of the Common Agricultural Policy. My parents' attitudes have rubbed off on me: my father is pro-free enterprise, believes in the right to private property and dislikes state nannying of any kind. He takes a dim view of over-mighty authority and some of this comes from time spent as a navigator and officer in the RAF - the youngest and least tradition-bound of the armed services.

My mother influenced me, not so much with specific ideas as by example. Her family were supporters of the old fa-

shioned Liberal Party of Asquith and Jo Grimmond. Respect for differing points of view, tolerance and dislike of arrogance were values drummed into my zealous head. It seems to have had some effect. Up until the age of about 14, then, I was not consciously fired up about politics but my home environment had few elements of state worship or collectivism of any kind. This is a great bonus and it has been a real pleasure to see my relatives show such interest in libertarian ideas.

School had an indirect but important influence in my early teens. I went to state comprehensives and these were not as dreadful as those of our big cities. I was quite lucky as most of my teachers were good at their jobs. (This does occur, amazingly).

It was not all wine and roses, however. I learned to hate authoritarianism and the obsession with conformity after enduring games lessons run by a sadistic PE teacher.² The bias in certain subjects, particularly history, woke me up to ideas and their importance. A history teacher gave me the "black satanic mills" version of the Industrial Revolution and described other historical periods such as the Great Depression with a strong collectivist slant. Aged just 12, "collectivist" or "statist" were not words I would have used to describe the views I was encountering but there seemed to be something dishonest about such teaching methods. At a crucially early stage, therefore, I began to question things and read books not recommended on homework lists. One day, aged about 14, I bought a paperback with a grinning American chap on the front. It was Professor Milton Friedman's classic, *Free to Choose*.³

THE FIRST 'BIG BOOK'

The book by the famous Chicago professor and his wife Rose, a best-selling account of why the market works and government does not, was my first real encounter with the ideas of classical liberalism. I was bowled over by this book and I owe Friedman a great debt. Although dozens of other, possibly better, books have boosted my understanding, I will always be grateful to him.

I recall reading him in about 1980-81, an impressionable time for a teenager keen on ideas. Recession was raging. Dole queues were mounting, the Labour Party was doing its best to embrace Marxism and commit suicide, and the sacred cows of the public sector were under threat.

Personal Perspectives No. 4

ISSN 0267-7156 ISBN 1 85637 110 7

An occasional publication of the Libertarian Alliance,
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The views expressed in this publication are those of its author, and not necessarily those of the Libertarian Alliance, its Committee, Advisory Council or subscribers.

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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY



Margaret Thatcher's struggle to roll back the frontiers of the state seemed both sensible and inspiring. She was a big contrast to her tired, often cynical opponents both within the Tory Party and the opposition. Dim memories of the "Winter of Discontent", plus the sheer unpleasantness of some socialists, all had a powerful impact on me.⁴

By the time I was aged about 17 I thought of myself as a Thatcherite Conservative. I felt a bit isolated as a youngster. Most friends were either bored by politics or socialists. I did not worry about this as being with the in-crowd has never been a great concern of mine.

LIFE IN THE IVORY TOWERS

Professor Friedman had opened the classical liberal front door and the house seemed full of good things. As soon as I entered Brighton Polytechnic to read History and Geography, I read F. A. Hayek's books, *The Constitution of Liberty* and *The Road to Serfdom*.⁵ The impact was even bigger than Friedman. When I read Hayek's piece called "Why I am not a Conservative", I re-defined myself. I was a fellow dinosaur, an old-fashioned liberal.

Studies of life in communist countries were illuminating. The sharp contrasts between North and South Korea, East and West Germany, Hong Kong and China, were crushing proof that socialism was a failure, and often a very brutal one. I tried to read some Marx, which was an effort because of his turgid prose, and concluded that the grim-faced friend of the workers was one of the biggest comen in history. Karl Popper's devastating study of Marx, and on Hegel and Plato,⁶ was also influential with me.

During my student days I also abandoned my Christian faith. I had been a confirmed Anglican and was quite devout in my early teens. But you cannot keep reason down and I am now an atheist who still has respect for the commonsense bits of the Judeo-Christian tradition, and its stress on the sanctity of human life. But I was left without a strong moral and philosophical base. What was the alternative?

A SMALL BOOKSHOP IN COVENT GARDEN

One day, in early 1985, I was flicking through the ad pages of the *Spectator* when I spotted a bit about "London's only anti-Marxist bookshop". I was finding it hard to get non-socialist tomes from mainstream bookshops and polytechnic sources, so this seemed promising. I wandered into the shop and began checking the vast range of books and journals available: Austrian economics, Soviet studies, libertarianism, rights theory, and countless journals from around the world. Shop staff had obviously learned to spot a potential libertarian because it did not take long before someone called Brian was firing questions at me. I picked up a sheaf of pamphlets by something called the Libertarian Alliance and returned to Brighton on the train. By the time I got off onto the platform I knew my label - I was a libertarian. I was not in a "right wing" or "left wing" pigeon-hole. It was exhilarating.

It is difficult to describe my pleasure at discovering all the different kinds of ideas I have encountered since that day in a small, and now sadly closed, shop in Covent Garden. I have been to countless seminars and conferences, and have written for the LA as well (not enough, I know!).

For me, libertarianism appeals because it is so dynamic and open-ended. It does not say: "This is The Book, believe it

completely, end of argument." Rather, it involves a vast range of ideas and encourages you to keep thinking. Our individual lives are research projects which we continue every day. I find this attitude very refreshing and a contrast to other creeds.

Most recently, I have become a fan of Ayn Rand and the Objectivist school. Her philosophy, which I am still exploring, seems to provide a base much stronger than my previous religious one. There are no commands from a God I cannot see or a Categorical Imperative plucked out of the sky, only the requirements of human nature and the light of my reason. Many young people, particularly in the USA, became passionate libertarians *after* reading Ms. Rand's superb novels and non-fiction works, so it is ironic, and typically English, that I discovered her work relatively late in my journey. Her novels express a daring and inspiring view of life matched by few other authors. She certainly inspires me.⁷ Unfortunately, getting hold of her best material is almost impossible in the UK unless a second-hand book store has a supply.

WHERE DO I GO FROM HERE?

I have a number of goals, some long-term, some more immediate. I want to get promotion within my newspaper, and eventually to work for a national paper or magazine. (Any editors out there interested in an anarcho-capitalist with professional journalist qualifications?) I want to explore the Objectivist position more fully by getting my hands on stuff by Eric Mack, David Kelley and Nathaniel Branden. I also want to explore the whole issue of the environment and the assault on science, as this is something libertarians will have to confront as a major threat to freedom.

I do not regret a minute of my intellectual voyage so far. I have enjoyed it and I strongly believe, without wanting to sound priggish about it, that I am on the side of truth, freedom and justice - and I am confident that victory is possible.

NOTES

1. I call journalism a trade rather than a profession here. Unlike medicine or the law, we do not operate a tightly controlled system designed to work like a closed shop. We do have a code of practice (not always well observed), but many trades, such as plumbing, do this as well.
2. To save him from being lynched, I will not name my games teacher or say exactly where I was educated. My experiences in this subject made me a strong supporter of scrapping compulsory schooling although my school years were generally happy.
3. Milton and Rose Friedman, *Free to Choose*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1980. An excellent and best-selling outline of the free market case.
4. Mrs. Thatcher's less liberal views on cultural and social matters, and her tolerance of erosions of common law traditions, have forced me to change my estimate of her, which is nevertheless still high compared to that of most post-war politicians.
5. F. A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom*, George Routledge, London, 1944. More recently printed by Ark Paperbacks, London, 1986. Same author, *The Constitution of Liberty*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1960.
6. Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Routledge, London, 1962.
7. Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged*, Random House, New York, 1957. Same author, *The Fountainhead*, Panther Books, London, 1961. I find the failure of British publishers to print her best fiction and non-fiction works completely baffling. Any smart businessmen out there?