

# PREACHING TO THE UNCONVERTED



BRIAN MICKLETHWAIT

Political Notes editor Brian Micklethwait states, with the help of leading American libertarian David Friedman, the libertarian case, and invites contributions from others willing to share in this task.

Regular readers of the literature put out by the Libertarian Alliance will have noticed that a significant part of this output now takes the form of the single A4 sheet, free of charge, hand-outs known as "Political Notes".

This format has several advantages. Although not without labour, the production process of Political Notes is, compared to the preparation of something like *Free Life* (the quarterly journal of the Libertarian Alliance) a doddle. Hence articles under the Political Notes banner tend to get printed quicker, and can thus be more topical.

Because Political Notes is relatively cheap to produce the LA can afford to give copies of it away, which, without undue waste, is what it does, mostly via a display at The Alternative Bookshop.

Because of being given away, Political Notes reaches a far more varied readership than *Free Life*, or other libertarian literature with a price tag on it. In particular, it is read by people who, until they read it, know nothing whatever of the libertarian position, on anything.

## WHAT IS LIBERTARIANISM?

So, what if you are just such a reader, whose total knowledge of the libertarian position consists of what you have learned from reading this leaflet, this far? Other issues of Political Notes have answered this question simply by reeling off page one of the LA's introductory leaflet, i.e. by writing out the following:

- (1) the right of all persons to life, liberty and justly acquired property;
- (2) the voluntary exchange of all goods and services;
- (3) each individual's liberty to pursue his or her chosen life-style, but not to impose it forcibly on anyone else;

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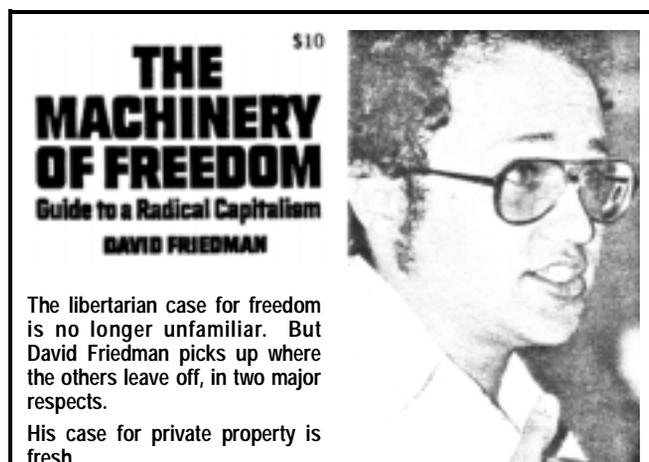


FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

(4) elimination of coercive intervention by the state, the foremost violator of liberty.

If the above sentiments are interesting enough to you to make you want to dig a bit deeper (assuming you haven't done this already), then one way would be to read my favorite introductory book on libertarianism: *The Machinery Of Freedom: Guide To A Radical Capitalism*, by David Friedman.

Like all libertarians I tend to exaggerate the importance of the particular route I took to being a libertarian, so because this was the book that "converted" me, my admiration for it may be excessive. But I really do think it very good, and this not just because the bookshop I work in has the entire stock of it now available outside the USA.



The libertarian case for freedom is no longer unfamiliar. But David Friedman picks up where the others leave off, in two major respects.

His case for private property is fresh

He dares to go beyond attractive theory to offer arresting, *workable* ways to "sell the State" in small pieces."

He demolishes the standard liberal arguments for the mixed economy, again offering new insights. After reading Dr. Friedman, no respectable liberal will ever again urge "human rights, not property rights" without feeling uneasy. As for "public property managed for the public

good," Dr. Friedman exposes the rerecession lurking in a formula most people take for granted.

But David Friedman doesn't stop at theory. The book abounds with practical ideas for getting rid of the big-government mess. The social problems are real: schools, pollution, mass transit, many more. The author doesn't simply say individuals can handle them better. He shows us *how*.

## NATURAL CONCLUSIONS

No David Friedman "industry" is likely to develop, whose industrialists take turns in saying what the great sage said, because you have only to read Friedman himself to find this out with great ease. The preface to *The Machinery Of Freedom* starts like this:

My political views seem natural and obvious to me. Others find them peculiar. Their peculiarity consists largely of carrying certain statements, familiar enough in political oratory, to their natural conclusions.

I believe, as many say they believe, that everyone has the right to run his own life — to go to hell in his own

fashion. I conclude, as do many on the left, that all censorship should be done away with. Also that all laws against drugs — marijuana, heroin, or Dr. Quack's cancer cure — should be repealed. Also laws requiring cars to have seat belts.

The right to control my life does not mean the right to have anything I want free; I can do that only by making someone else pay for what I get. Like any good right winger, I oppose welfare programs that support the poor with money taken by force from the taxpayers.

I also oppose tariffs, subsidies, loan guarantees, urban renewal, agricultural price supports — in short, all of the much more numerous programs that support the not-poor — often the rich — with money taken by force from the taxpayers — often the poor.

## A VIRTUOUS SOCIETY

Friedman summarises the libertarian case like this:

The central idea of libertarianism is that people should be permitted to run their own lives as they wish. We totally reject the idea that people must be forcibly protected from themselves.

And a little further on:

People who wished to aid others would do so voluntarily through private charity, instead of using money collected by force from the taxpayers. People who wished to provide for their old age would do so through private insurance.

People who wish to live in a "virtuous" society, surrounded by others who share their ideas of virtue, would be free to set up their own communities and to contract with each other so as to prevent the "sinful" from buying or renting within them. Those who wished to live communally could set up their own communes. But nobody would have the right to force his way of life upon his neighbor.

And so on. Friedman's next chapter is called "In Defense of Property".

As you can probably tell from such phrases as "urban renewal", David Friedman is an American who writes "in American". The conclusion will be drawn from this fact by some British readers that libertarianism is an exclusively American notion, of no relevance to us and our problems. Naturally we in the Libertarian Alliance do not believe this, and we are busy creating our own body of literature written "in English", full of references to the GLC, Bruce Forsyth, helmetless football, and so on.

Political Notes is part of this enterprise.

## WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Regular readers of Political Notes are entitled to suspect that if a writer's Christian name is "Brian" his chances of getting something printed in Political Notes are somewhat increased, and that if in addition his surname is "Micklethwait" success is a virtual certainty. On the other hand, would-be scribes will fear, to score nought out of two in this test guarantees failure. The revelation that Brian Micklethwait is the present editor of Political Notes will cause little amazement, if any.

The above circumstance is beginning to change. Brian Micklethwait may be the editorial supremo of Political Notes, but the Libertarian Alliance also contains vested interests like Chris Tame (Secretary), Tony Hollick (*Free Life* editor), various directors, advisers, and so on, all of whom must be placated. From time to time members even express their views. The point has been reached where the name "Brian Micklethwait" as a Political Notes writer is almost a liability. Accordingly, other writers must now have their work published in Political

Notes, if only so that Brian Micklethwait can continue to write for Political Notes without incurring further hostility in the upper reaches of the LA.

So if you have something to say that is related to libertarianism, and in particular something that persuasively applies libertarian principles to some special topic of interest to you, send it in.

## GUIDANCE

Try to fill what you consider to be gaps in the LA output. There have been recent LA articles about Poland, Russia and the Lebanon, and America is an inevitable libertarian obsession. But there hasn't been anything I can recall on South Africa, Hong Kong or Guinea Bissau. Children have been much discussed, but old people not, and so on.

Past issues of Political Notes have dealt, among other things, with anarchy, democracy, unemployment and schools. Future issues are "planned" (i.e. I promise nothing, except some more issues) dealing with transport, broadcasting, libertarian tactics, and democracy (again).

You could even say why you think libertarianism is nonsense, provided you leave some space for me or someone to say why we think you are wrong.

Study a previous copy of Political Notes, and ensure that your piece will fit in the same space. Try to leave room for eye catching graphics. Better still, supply some with your article. I like doing photo-reductions of newspapers, but am not obsessed with this technique. Photo-reduction is cheap, but colour is right out.

By all means be topical, but don't assume knowledge of any supposedly public events you may choose to discuss. We want to keep Political Notes in print, so it must make sense to English readers anywhere on earth, in 1997.

Above all, remember that (see the heading above) you are preaching to the unconverted. Do *not* assume knowledge of the libertarian position, and feel entirely free to burden hardened libertarians with yet another summary of libertarianism, just as I have done in this piece.

However, do not bully the reader with nags to the effect that he is either a libertarian of exactly our type or a worm. Distinguish between telling him what libertarians think and telling him that he also should think that. The "libertarians believe" ("socialists reject", "Christians proclaim" etc.) technique is a good one, because it lets the reader stand outside the debate, while still learning what it consists of. He can take sides if he wants to, but need not. Remember, ideas are often spread by those who profoundly disagree with them, but who understand what they are and describe them accurately to others.

Apart from writing something relevant to libertarianism, the main rule is: write well. For my understanding of what that means see George Orwell's classic essay "Politics and The English Language". Or, if digging up ancient masterpieces annoys you, write the way you wish you could talk, and the way you like others to talk to you.

## DEBATES

*Free Life*, I am reminded, also welcomes further articles, whether on new topics, or in the form of comments on articles already printed or debates already in progress.

We have lots of debates. Libertarianism is not a wall-chart from which the correct opinion about any issue can be quickly discovered.

Here's another David Friedman quote a lot of us are fond of:

Somewhere in the world there may be two libertarians who agree with each other about everything, but I am not one of them.