

# A LIBERTARIAN MESSAGE TO THATCHERITE CONSERVATIVES (FEBRUARY 1985)



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## INTRODUCTION — January 2001

This little piece, which I reproduce here without alteration apart from a few newly added footnotes, was published (as “Why Be A Libertarian?”) in the February 1985 issue of the *Unionist*. I still have the publication.

I don't know what effect it had on those who first read it. The people running that magazine were, then as now, preoccupied with a very different struggle (the one in Northern Ireland) to the one involved in spreading libertarianism. Nevertheless, the original format (it all fitted snugly onto one page and was my artwork rather than theirs) makes me assume that the piece may have reached others besides the readers of the *Unionist*.

Which I think it deserved — and still deserves — to do. It doesn't say much about libertarianism, but it does say something of how the now-defunct political era dominated by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher encouraged the spread of something not unlike libertarianism among British Conservatives.

Britain now has a different, centre-left government, but it was a precondition of its election that it would continue to keep public spending under some sort of control. So although it may not seem like it, and under a very different rhetorical surface, the same sort of ideas are continuing to spread among mainstream British politicians.

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**FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY**

A good summary of libertarianism is to be found on the front of the Libertarian Alliance introductory leaflet *Our Enemy The State*,<sup>1</sup> which invites support for the following principles:

- 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.

I'm a libertarian because I believe that applying libertarian principles will have — and does have — good results. Some libertarians believe that people have some kind of God-given or “natural” right to liberty. Not me. What counts most for me is that certain (relatively libertarian) places seem better than others, especially such laboratory exhibits as West Germany, South Korea and Taiwan, whose superiority to East Germany, North Korea and mainland China is only explicable in terms of the contrasting principles that guide the governments concerned.

People who own property use it to devise desirable goods and services. People allowed to swap what they've made will do that, to the huge benefit of all. By serving others people serve themselves; by serving themselves they serve others. The less the government interferes in all this the better.

## LIBERTARIANISM AND THE CONSERVATIVES

How is it that Conservatives are so attracted by ideas like these? For they are, despite the distrust felt by all true conservatives towards all radical ideological enthusiasms.

Partly it's because the-enemy-of-my-enemy-is-my-friend. Conservatives oppose socialism. Libertarians oppose socialism. Q.E.D.

But why is libertarianism spreading in the Conservative Party now all of a sudden? The answer is that there has been a crisis of statism. In plain language, the government can no longer solve its problems by writing out blank cheques, because the money has run out. Public sector unions can no longer be bought off; they have to be crushed. The state must assert itself, because the option of just shaking the hands of all concerned and splitting the difference is no longer available.

The last thing libertarians believe in is the state asserting itself, yet for the politician trying to subjugate the “public sector” libertarian ideas are most useful.

“I can assure you” murmurs the Thatcherite cabinet minister reassuringly, to a resentful trade unionist, “that this government has no intention of SELLING OFF ALL THE COAL MINES TO THE HIGHEST BIDDER. We are definitely committed to not SCRAPPING TARIFF BARRIERS AGAINST IMPORTED COAL. It is no part of our strategy to have a FREE MARKET IN NATURAL GAS. We can give categorical assurances that under no circumstances will we ABANDON STATE EDUCATION. We have no plans whatever for TEARING THE NATIONAL HEALTH SERVICE INTO LITTLE PIECES AND FEEDING IT TO THE LIONS IN LONDON ZOO. Definitely not. Perish the thought.” Etcetera.

And what of policemen, judges and soldiers? Well, many libertarians believe that defence, law and order, the very law itself, are services that should be bought and sold on the free market, just like insurance or car maintenance now. Even that notion might come in handy one day, if the judges ever decide to go on strike? (This, by the way, is not at all far-fetched. Leftist penetration of the legal profession is already quite far advanced.)

## TRADITION

A common Conservative criticism of libertarianism is that we oppose the whole idea of tradition. We oppose, it is said, all rules, habits, customs and ancient wisdoms, and are only satisfied with propositions (moral or of any other kind) which can be explicitly proved.

But libertarians are as keen on the traditions of their tribe as the other tribesmen, because following the rules is a wise strategy which seldom does much harm, while breaking rules invites disaster. Do you know how to build a house? I'll tell you. Copy the one next door, brick by brick. What sort of food is good to eat? What the other fellows are eating, that's what. Only fools insist on everything being explained, proved or justified. You want to eat something the tribe says is poisonous? Go ahead, and learn the hard way why you shouldn't have. Libertarians insist on the right of people to defy tradition, if they insist, but this is hardly a comprehensive attack on tradition. Nor is it a prediction that people will in fact smash traditions merely because they are allowed to.

Liberty balances the wisdom of the past against the opportunities of the future. Free people make their different judgements as to which of many strategies — old or new — is the best, in their particular line of business. Other free people pick and choose between the results.

If you really want to smash a tradition, get the government to do it. If you want to demoralise everyone (literally de moralise) get the government to give free hand-outs to everyone, however feckless, irresponsible or downright wicked they may be. Freedom and tradi-

tion go hand in hand. As do tyranny, moral degradation and the ruin of tradition. Protect fools from their folly, and you fill the world with fools. Libertarianism, on the other hand, means people facing the costs of what they do.

Where libertarians and Conservatives part company is when Conservatives bring in the state to preserve, like a ship in a bottle, a tradition that would otherwise die.

Winners do not “take all”, in the free market. In a political dictatorship yes, in the market no. Nor does “the devil take the hindmost”. Unrestrained capitalism in all its vulgar, rip-roaring plenitude is BY FAR THE BEST CURE FOR POVERTY THERE IS. “Vulgar” is the descendant of the Latin word meaning a crowd of jobs.

And that's why elitist, statist intellectuals hate and fear capitalism, and the liberty that is its cause and precondition. Capitalism dethrones them. They don't decide what's best; we all do, nobs, jobs and all in between. We don't have to explain at any length what we want, nor why we want it. We can just pick it off the shelf, or point in the catalogue and say: that one! My money's as good as yours, no matter what colour I am or what school I went to.

In a free society all classes do better, except tyrants. Under tyranny all classes do worse, except tyrants. No fanatic for the redistribution of wealth has ever equalled things out. (How equal is *he*?) All he does is destroy the means by which wealth is created, leaving the little remaining wealth more unequally distributed than ever.

## HOW TO LEARN MORE ABOUT LIBERTARIANISM

Become a subscriber to the Libertarian Alliance, at £5 per annum. Visit The Alternative Bookshop (3 Langley Court, Covent Garden, London WC2E 9JY) and/or buy from it *The Machinery of Freedom* by David Friedman (£6.50 + 60p postage — much less to LA subscribers<sup>2</sup>) which is the best introduction to libertarianism I know of. Or buy *An End To Allegiance*, Geoffrey Sampson's excellent British view of the libertarian scene (£12.50 + £1 postage).<sup>3</sup> Unless you choose not to, that is.

## NOTES

1. This leaflet is now long out of print. Some may be bored by me using these four points yet again at the start of a Libertarian Alliance, but see my view of the value of repetition *How To Win The Libertarian Argument*, Tactical Notes No. 8, 1990, as a propaganda tactic.
2. That offer for *The Machinery of Freedom* (Open Court, La Salle, 1989), like the Alternative Bookshop itself, ended long ago. Subscribing to the Libertarian Alliance now costs a minimum of £25.
3. Geoffrey Sampson, *An End to Allegiance: Individual Freedom and the New Politics*, Maurice Temple Smith, London, 1984.