

CAN A LIBERTARIAN ALSO BE A CONSERVATIVE?

Antoine Clarke

Antoine Clarke graduated in Philosophy from Birkbeck College, University of London, and completed his Baccalauréat in Economics and Social Sciences at the French Lycée Charles de Gaulle in London. He is currently studying for a Masters in Business Administration at The Open University. Has written about currency competition and free banking for the Libertarian Alliance and the Adam Smith Institute. He is a former member of the Slovak Republic Prime Minister's Policy Unit in Bratislava and economic and political advisor to the Finance Minister of the Slovak Republic in 1991. A journalist and communications expert, he has worked for media outlets in the UK, France and Spain, and is fluent in English and French. This essay is a slightly edited version of the winner of the Libertarian Alliance's 2009 Chris R. Tame Memorial Prize: "Can a Libertarian also be a Conservative?"

Political Notes No. 195
ISBN 9781856376228
ISSN 0267-7059 (Print)
ISSN 2042-2776 (Online)

© 2010: Libertarian Alliance & Antoine Clarke

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

Dr Chris R. Tame (1949-2006): Founder
Dr Tim Evans: President
Dr Sean Gabb: Director
David Farrer: Scottish Director & Financial Director
David Davis: Blogmaster & Scientific Adviser
Dr Nigel Gervas Meek: Publications Director
Mario Huet: LA Forum Listmaster
Christian Michel: European Director
David Carr: Legal Affairs Spokesman
Patrick Crozier: Transport Spokesman

 **Libertarian
Alliance**

For Life, Liberty, and Property

Suite 35
2 Lansdowne Row
Mayfair
London
W1J 6HL

Telephone: 0870 242 1712
Email: admin@libertarian.co.uk
Website: www.libertarian.co.uk

CAN A LIBERTARIAN ALSO BE A CONSERVATIVE?

Antoine Clarke

“At all times sincere friends of freedom have been rare, and its triumphs have been due to minorities, that have prevailed by associating themselves with auxiliaries whose objects often differed from their own; and this association, which is always dangerous, has sometimes been disastrous, by giving to opponents just grounds of opposition.”

Lord Acton, cited by F.A. Hayek¹

INTRODUCTION: THE COLD WAR ALLIANCE

An informal alliance between conservatives and libertarians, especially in the United Kingdom, can be said to have started with Winston Churchill’s Iron Curtain speech in March 1946, and ended with the abolition of the Federation of Conservative Students in 1986 because of its take over by libertarian activists and the collapse of the Soviet Empire in 1989 to 1991.

The abolition of the FCS marked the moment when the Thatcherite part of the Conservative Party preferred to abort its own intellectual future, rather than continue what had been a fairly successful alliance against the idea of big government, at home and abroad.

The alliance, as often in history, was based on the perception of a common external enemy, Soviet imperialism, as well as the

internal threat of socialist economic policies of nationalization and central planning. There was also the sense in the United Kingdom at least, that the social engineering experiment of the welfare state was an assault on freedom, whether liberty was valued for being ancient and traditional, or for being the expression of individual freedom of self-actualisation.

There was some disagreement on what to do about the Cold War. The British Conservatives were often more opposed to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation because of the subservient position that the UK was placed in relation to the United States of America. British libertarians, in stark contrast with most of their US counterparts, tended to be more favourable to fighting a global crusade against communism.

On the welfare state, conservative paternalism was reluctant to “abandon” the poor to their own initiative. Chris R Tame, the Libertarian Alliance’s founder put the conservative view of libertarianism thus:

“The average classical-liberal sympathising conservative puts our ideology in a liberty versus order straight-jacket, where freedom is seen to be achieved at a cost in social order and security, and where those values can only be achieved at the price of liberty. This is a typically conservative viewpoint in which freedom and order are in tension with one another, and

the remedy for social chaos is the state.”²

In the USA, the experiences of isolationism, the Pearl Harbor attack of December 7th 1941 and the Vietnam War exerted diverging pressures on any libertarian/conservative alliance on foreign policy. However, a coalition of what two British commentators termed “Sun Belt conservatism” and a religious opposition to the secularist/welfarist “liberalism” from the 1930s’ New Deal to the 1960s’ Great Society, gathered pace from the dynamic but electorally unsuccessful 1964 Barry Goldwater campaign, to what became known as “The Right Nation.”³

GOD, THE ENLIGHTENMENT AND HOBBS: IS THERE COMMON GROUND FOR LIBERTARIANS AND CONSERVATIVES?

The modern libertarian movement is a fusion of several historic intellectual traditions, with a style that generally embraces human progress and the liberating aspects of technology. Traditionally, conservatism could be seen as the long struggle against the enlightenment, taking a sceptical view of human nature which is either explained in terms of Original Sin or a distrust of rationalism.

Dr Tame, in an interview with the current LA President, Tim Evans, expressed the optimism of the libertarian position as: “We’re extreme rationalists... Death and Taxes, we’re against BOTH of them!”⁴ The libertarian tends to oppose God’s plan, sees the Enlightenment and its economic outcome—the Industrial Revolu-

tion—as the most tremendous liberating force in 2,000 years, and flatly rejects Thomas Hobbes’ scepticism about what free individuals will get up to without a night-watchman state to keep them in line.

Roger Scruton, formerly the editor of the *Salisbury Review* and Professor of Philosophy at Birkbeck College, the University of London, set out the conservative objection to the Enlightenment’s humanism in a *Wall Street Journal* article in 1996, titled “Godless Conservatism.”⁵

Professor Scruton wrote:

“There is a growing tendency among American conservatives to blame society’s present condition not merely on liberals but on the secular and sceptical philosophy of the Enlightenment, from which modern liberalism descends. As conservatives see it, the constant questioning of established beliefs and authorities has set us upon a path that has anarchy as its only destination. Many conservatives therefore suggest that we must repudiate the Enlightenment and reaffirm the thing against which the Enlightenment stood: organized religion.”

He added:

“it is not hard to sympathize. Religious belief fills our world with an authority that cannot be questioned and from which all our duties flow. Yet there is something despondent in the search for a religious solution to the problems of secular society. All too often the search is conducted in a spirit of despair by people who are as

*infected by the surrounding nihilism as those whose behavior they wish to rectify. Their message is simple: 'God is dead—but don't spread it around.' Such words can be whispered among friends but not broadcast to the multitude."*⁶

Professor Scruton and Dr Tame would have agreed on almost every issue of significance during the 1970s and 1980s: the economy, the harm caused by socialism, the Cold War, the “battle of ideas,” yet the philosophical underpinning of their positions was almost entirely opposite. This would not matter so long as the target for their attention was the same and the solution, if only by coincidence, was broadly the same: to support the underground civil society of Soviet colonies, to oppose socialism performed by Conservative politicians, the importance of the statement of ideas and their debate.

Yet as with such coalition projects as the French Revolution, harmonious relations would struggle to last beyond the achievement of power or the disappearance of the common enemy. Here, one of the striking differences between the British and US coalitions can be found. According to John Micklethwait and Adrian Woolridge, in philosophical terms, classical conservatism, as formulated by Edmund Burke, “might be crudely reduced to six principles.”

These are:

- a deep suspicion of the power of the state;
- a preference for liberty over equality;
- patriotism;
- a belief in established institutions and hierarchies;

- scepticism about the idea of progress; and
- elitism.

Micklethwait and Woolbridge argue that:

*“to simplify a little, the exceptionalism of modern American conservatism lies in its exaggeration of the first three of Burke's principles and contradiction of the last three. The American Right exhibits a far deeper hostility toward the state than any other modern conservative party. How many European conservatives would display bumper stickers saying 'I love my country but I hate my government'?”*⁷

The result is that American conservatives tend to display more openness to human progress, making an alliance with some libertarians possible (it may also help to explain the poor performance of the US Libertarian Party since 1972). The American conservative movement tends to take a classical liberal approach to Burke's last three principles: hierarchy, pessimism and elitism. The heroes of modern American conservatism tend to be the same as for libertarians: rugged individualists who don't know their place and defer to class status, the self-made businessman, or settlers on the Western frontier.

As Micklethwait and Woolbridge put it:

“the geography of conservatism also helps to explain its optimism rather than pessimism. In the war between the Dynamo and the Virgin, as Henry Adams characterized the battle between progress and tradition, most American conservatives are on

the side of the Dynamo. They think that the world offers all sorts of wonderful possibilities. And they feel that the only thing that is preventing people from attaining these possibilities is the dead liberal hand of the past."⁸

A more modern representation of this cleavage can be found in the writings of Virginia Postrel, especially her best-selling work, *The Future and Its Enemies*.⁹ She replaces the left-right cleavage with one based on the notions of people as either "dynamists" or "stasists."

Sean Gabb, the Libertarian Alliance's Director, is perhaps the best known British advocate of "libertarian conservatism," a body of beliefs that consists of harking back to the days when a British subject could spend virtually his or her entire life with no contact with government or its services except when visiting a Post Office.

Although he did not use the term in his 1974 book, *The Offshore Islanders*,¹⁰ Paul Johnson remarked that English history can be seen as a succession of conservative revolutions, largely attempting to restore ancient liberties, in marked contrast with the French Revolution of 1789 for example, which aimed to create a new order, to the point of creating a decimal calendar with 10-day weeks and 10-hour days with new names for the months.¹¹ The contrast between the ancient liberties of Englishmen (a near approximation of the libertarian ideal) is defended in the name of both its liberalism and its rooting in history.

One example of how these forces are fused in Dr Gabb's activism has been the 15-year campaign against national identity cards, which has in no way been deflected according to which political party (Conservative or Labour) has held office in the UK.¹²

Dr Gabb wrote:

"I believe, however, that there is more to 'rolling back the frontiers of the State' than paying regard to economic indicators alone. It is not enough to control the money supply and deregulate the unemployed back into work. It is necessary to roll back the frontiers in social and political matters as well. My ideal England—the England that largely existed before 1914—is one in which individuals and groups of individuals are free to pursue their ends, constrained only by a minimal framework of laws."

"I have no doubt that an identity card scheme would be absolutely fatal to the realising of this ideal—even the 'voluntary' scheme that Mr [Michael] Howard proposes for the moment. It would undermine the half-open society in which we now live. Given the technology that will soon be available, it would allow the erection of the most complete despotism that ever existed in these islands. I am astonished that such a scheme could be put forward by a government that dares call itself Conservative. It is a betrayal not merely of the libertarian and classical liberal wings of the Party, but also of the most reactionary High Toryism. I will not argue whether this is socialism by other

means. But it is undoubtedly collectivist.”

The problem appears to be that there is a type of modern Conservative who really does not believe in God, natural rights, the virtue of ancient customs, or spontaneous order. I came across this position in 2002, in a series of discussions on-line with Peter Cuthbertson, who at least has the credit of being one of the very early pioneers of conservative blogging in the UK. One could argue that this was a continuation of the debate between a Lockean and a Hobbesian in the 17th century. Under the title ‘Is there an Act of Parliament for Table Manners?’¹³ I wrote:

“I don’t normally respond publicly to comments, but I will make an exception. Peter Cuthbertson has a blog called Conservative Commentary, it is certainly better than the Conservative Party’s website. He thinks that this conclusion I made makes me insane:

‘The problem for British libertarians is that they aren’t really used to the idea that the state really is our enemy. This is one reason why I don’t think that the UK withdrawing from the European Union is an automatic recipe for joy.’

In the exchange which follows he appears to believe that ‘without law or government’ society cannot function, and those who disagree with him are ‘insane’ or follow ‘an incoherent, warped political philosophy.’”

I continued

“However, it amazes me that Mr Cuthbertson cannot see that law doesn’t necessarily derive from government. For a start, any conservative who believes in God ought to consider the possibility that there is a higher authority than the State. Assuming atheism (which isn’t very conservative, but hey, who’s being coherent?), I should have hoped that a conservative might believe in the organic, spontaneous order of common law. Assuming God doesn’t exist, and the common law is a fiction (sounds more like a French Jacobin!), what has Mr Cuthbertson done with civil society? Is it true that members of the Carlton Club only behave because of the fear of being arrested by the police? Does the members’ code of conduct depend on the State for its existence and enforcement? Is there an Act of Parliament for table manners?”

TRIBAL POLITICS: IS THERE COMMON GROUND FOR LIBERTARIANS OR CONSERVATIVES?

In presenting the major philosophical differences between conservatism and libertarianism, I am conscious of one potential fallacy to the negative prognosis: a marriage doesn’t have to be perfect to be successful. Within each of the tribes, conservative and libertarian, there are numerous differences of opinion, often underpinned by a complete opposite fundamental principle.

There is the obvious problem of abortion. To one school of libertarian, the woman's right to choose is absolute and rooted in the idea of self-ownership of our bodies. Surely no one could argue against that! But other libertarians argue that there is a point at which a foetus is more than merely a type of cancer tumour, to be charged rent or evicted. They may root their argument in the concept of a natural right to life from the moment of conception, or 10 weeks, or 20 weeks of pregnancy. If it is wrong to kill someone who is in a temporary coma, or remove their organs without consent, and also wrong to do the same to a mute or a child who has not yet developed speech, why is it acceptable for a being that has some degree of consciousness and would surely develop all the human attributes of sentience and free will?

Another issue is the transitional state. Even if all libertarians were anarchists, and many are not, what of the national debt? Should it be defaulted in full at once? Should government promises of pensions be treated as the promises of extortionists and therefore have no contractual force? Are Bank of England notes to be rejected in the Libertarian Year Zero? Or collaborators with the "bureaucrato-feudalist régime" shot?

One starts doubting whether one can even properly speak of a libertarian position, given the multitude of factions (which have a tendency to denounce each other as "deviant" in a not always deliberate self-parody of the Popular Judean Front of Monty Python's *Life of Brian*). However, it should be noted that the same cleavages exist in any ideological school, whether it be socialism, conserva-

tism or liberalism, so it would be wrong to worry too much about libertarianism's diverse origins and blueprints for a good society.

Conservatism can mean the support of a theocratic society, the restoration of absolutist monarchy, opposition to post-Leninist reforms in the Soviet Union, support for the use of tanks against student protestors, opposition to homosexuality, the support for free trade, protectionism, the abolition of drug prohibition or its resolute enforcement. Conservatives are split on abortion, taxes, the National Health Service and whether London should have got the 2012 Olympic Games.

CONCLUSIONS

Libertarians and conservatives have many vehement (not violent) disagreements and it is fair to say that each side's vision of heaven on Earth could be considered hellish to the other. Yet within each tribe, there are people who have as much in common with each other as with their own tribes. One thinks of prostitution, abortion and the death penalty, to name just three examples.

Because both a conservative and a libertarian have a degree of scepticism about the power of the State "to make things right," it is very likely that opportunities for defensive joint action will emerge from time to time. Conservatives will tend to see their role as reigning in the enthusiasm of libertarians for technology as a liberating force for humanity. Libertarians will see their role as giving the conservatives a kick up the backside for their

passive acceptance of inevitable defeat.

However, it is probably worth keeping in mind the words of Lord Acton, concerning the challenge of ideological alliances which opened this essay:

“At all times sincere friends of freedom have been rare, and its triumphs have been due to minorities, that have prevailed by associating themselves with auxiliaries whose objects often differed from their own; and this association, which is always dangerous, has sometimes been disastrous, by giving to opponents just grounds of opposition.”

Each party to the alliance, libertarian and conservative, regards the other as a sometimes embarrassing auxiliary.

NOTES

(1) F.A. Hayek, ‘Why I Am Not a Conservative’, in *The Constitution of Liberty*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1960.

(2) Chris Tame & Gerry Frost, *Libertarianism Versus Conservatism: A Debate*, Libertarian Alliance Pamphlet No. 14, 1989, retrieved 11th July 2010, <http://tinyurl.com/2db6mmm>.

(3) John Micklethwait & Adrian Wooldridge, *The Right Nation: Why America is Different*, Penguin, 2005.

(4) Tim Evans, *Maggies’s Militants*, video produced as part of a PhD thesis, published as *Conservative radicalism: A Sociology of Conservative Party Youth Structures and Libertarianism 1970-1992*, Berghahn Books,

Oxford, 1995.

(5) Roger Scruton, ‘Godless Conservatism’, *The Wall Street Journal*, Friday, April 5th 1996, p. 8.

(6) *Ibid.*

(7) Micklethwait & Wooldridge, *op cit.*

(8) *Ibid.*

(9) Virginia Postrel, *The Future and Its Enemies: The Growing Conflict Over Creativity, Enterprise and Progress*, The Free Press, 1998.

(10) Paul Johnson, *The Offshore Islanders: England’s People from Roman Occupation to the Present*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1972.

(11) ‘French Republican Calendar’, 26th November 2009, retrieved 2nd December 2009, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/French_Republican_Calendar.

(12) Sean Gabb, *A Libertarian Conservative Case Against Identity Cards*, Libertarian Alliance Political Notes No. 98, 1994, <http://tinyurl.com/25w5b47>.

(13) Antoine Clarke, ‘Is there an Act of Parliament for Table Manners?’, *Samizdata* blog, 30th November 2002, retrieved 11th July 2010, <http://tinyurl.com/2flshc3>.