

# PURPOSE AND STRATEGY OF THE LIBERTARIAN ALLIANCE

This article, by the Executive Committee of the Libertarian Alliance, originally appeared in *Free Life*, the Journal of the Libertarian Alliance, Volume Two, No. 2, in 1981. In broad outline it reflects the views of all of the founder members of the Libertarian Alliance concerning strategy and tactics. Future issues of Tactical Notes will include various personal responses to and criticisms of Tactical Notes No. 1.

## IDEAS CHANGE SLOWLY

Although ideas sometimes change slightly as a direct result of the political cut-and-thrust, fundamental ideas usually change slowly. There are entrenched assumptions which cannot be challenged by anyone who wishes to be politically influential. Politicians of a reflective disposition will often admit that a certain policy has great merits, but will add that it is "politically impossible", because it goes against ruling opinions inherited from the past.

## BUT IDEAS CHANGE

Yet these fundamental ideas do change. In the *Wealth of Nations* Smith ridiculed the possibility that free trade could ever be introduced in Britain. A few decades later, it substantially had been, and the *Wealth of Nations* was largely responsible. Other examples include the rapid spread of Marxism in Europe before the First World War, and in recent years the sudden collapse of the monolithic Keynesian consensus. In both these cases, preparatory developments in earlier decades, which might have seemed quite inconsequential to many, were vital.

As a result of such changes, the parameters of politics shift. What was politically possible becomes politically impossible, and what was politically impossible may even become impossible to resist.

## HOW IDEAS CHANGE

It is a mistake to think that these changes occur by means of a gradual diffusion of slight influences affecting the mass of people uniformly. Free trade, Marxism and monetarism did not gain influence because millions of ordinary people found them day by day that bit more appealing. They spread because they were adopted by small groups of people who turned out to be influential propagandists. These ideas were picked up by individuals atypical of the mass, variously known as "intellectuals", "propagandists" or "purveyors of second-hand ideas". After decades of these ideas being discussed by little coterie in unprepossessing journals and grubby meeting halls, barely noticed by the surrounding world and without any great effect upon it, the ideas were disseminated more widely and in due course played their part in the rise and fall of empires.

Within the community of intellectuals there is the same hierarchical relationship as within society at large: the groundling intellectuals tardily accept the ideas advanced earlier by higher-order intellectuals.

Very roughly, the ideas which make the running in current social policy are the ideas embraced by the lower-order intellectuals twenty years earlier, and by the higher-order intellectuals fifty years earlier. There are many important exceptions and qualifications to this picture, but it is much more accurate than the theory that millions of people spontaneously change their ideas, a bit at a time, in a direction which appeals to them. Very few people would accept that latter theory if stated in

those words, but they implicitly accept it when they come to the task of persuading the world to implement whatever particular policies they hold dear. They ask themselves how all those people out there in the street can be directly worked upon in order to imbue them with the desired outlook and assumptions. But that is an adman's question, the wrong question, and if it is asked, the correct answer (that there is no way it can be done) will be unnecessarily dispiriting.

The use of the term "intellectuals" above should not be misinterpreted. The intellectuals or propagandists who matter are not necessarily very intelligent or well-qualified. A few may happen to be academics, but most will not be.

## MASS PUBLICITY NOT THE AIM

What all this means in concrete terms is that a libertarian propaganda group primarily aims to recruit a number (small by necessity) of committed and knowledgeable adherents to libertarian doctrine. The group should not be much concerned with the direct results of publicity-seeking efforts or of campaigning for particular political measures.

All of the group's activities should be judged in the light of long-term propaganda. The group will seek some media attention and will effortlessly receive more, and will agitate and campaign on particular issues. It will be a welcome bonus if any of these efforts are intrinsically successful, but it will be no great tragedy if they have no effect on legislation or on mass opinion. Their main value is in recruiting the few potential libertarian propagandists, and in helping to educate those already recruited.

The recruiting of one committed and knowledgeable libertarian activist is of immensely more value than thousands of pages of publicity in the national press or thousands of hours of TV exposure. Those pages and hours of media coverage might result in the obtaining of several recruits. But recruits to what? If it be recruits to an organisation for getting further pages and hours of coverage, it is futile, if not harmful.

Shallow free market sympathisers sometimes come to us and say: "Why don't you do something?" The answer is that we are doing something, invariably far more even in crude man-hours than the speaker, and he is welcome to help us in what we are doing, provided he understands and sympathizes with it.

What he has in mind, however, is some attention-getting campaign. In other words he wants us to allocate time and energy we now allocate to doing something important (higher-order, long-term propaganda) and allocate it to doing something ephemeral and silly.

## FIASCO IN THE US

The false ideas of which the above is a denial have made a mess of the libertarian movement in the US. Ridiculous over-optimism about the rate at which ideas change, or can be made to change, underlies most of what the US libertarian movement, in its many manifestations, does.

It is an open question, on which the LA takes no position, whether it is a good idea to form a libertarian political party. But it is a hopeless delusion to expect a principled libertarian party to be a serious contender for power, or even to attract much public notice, for decades to come. The fact is that if the mass of people knew fully what libertarianism meant, they would find major parts of it unacceptable and positively offensive. That situation is not going to change within a generation, and anyone who thinks it could announces himself as a fool, hopelessly out of touch with reality, and not to be trusted to have anything to do with libertarian propaganda.

## FALSE PREMISES OF CLARK'S CAMPAIGN

The political dishonesty of the Clark campaign has been condemned by many libertarians who shared in the basic premises that made it inescapable, embodied in the preposterous slogan "Towards a three party system". (Preposterous because the three party system was expected to materialize within twenty or so years.) A principled libertarian party would alienate most people. An unprincipled party would probably fail to compete effectively with the other unprincipled parties, but if it did, would soon cease to be libertarian. (For all that it matters, there is actually a serious case that a principled libertarian party would even get more votes than an unprincipled one.)

It is characteristic of the immaturity and superficiality over the "moral" question of whether to take part in politics, and having decided to do so, immediately assumed that the LP should try to ape the major parties, and should measure its success by how many votes it got. All that matters is whether a political party would be effective. There are arguments either way about its possible effectiveness — that is, about the propaganda effectiveness of an organisation calling itself a "party", and allocating, say, three per cent of its efforts to standing for elections. There are no serious arguments for a "libertarian party" which thinks it can get people elected and walk to the centre of the political stage within a few years, and which devotes more than eighty per cent of its resources to elections. That is just a fantasy, a complete waste of time and money.

Some libertarians involved with the LP give as their reason the fact that "ninety-five per cent of ordinary Americans can be induced to take an interest in political matters only at election times". The mistake lies in being greatly concerned with ninety-five per cent of ordinary Americans. At this stage, the other five per cent matter much more. (It is not implied here that we pay no attention to ninety-five per cent of the population: we cannot sensibly restrict our efforts in that way, because it is not known who are the five per cent, and there is

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no way to find out, except by trial and error in the process of propaganda itself.) Another argument is that thousands have become active through the LP. But what good are these activists? If they don't read books, and if they think of promoting libertarianism as a gigantic advertising campaign, we would be better off without them.

Many of those disillusioned by the Clark campaign have turned to other nostrums: the counter-economy, immersion in various campaigns run by socialists or appeals to "oppressed minorities" like blacks and gays. The underlying misconception remains unchanged: that there is some trick which will enable big results to be obtained soon.

In other quarters there is some concern with "cadre-building", and this is wholly to be welcomed, though it often goes along with an imitation of the comical prose of the Marxist sects, and with a dogmatic insistence on points of doctrine which at this stage ought to be left open for internal discussion. Furthermore, it is not clear that the "cadre builders" have fully absorbed the long-range attitude of serious analysis and recruitment. It is better, for example, to have a magazine that circulates to a few hundred people (provided they are the right few hundred!) and keeps going for fifty years, than to have a magazine which sells 100,000 copies a month, has glossy colour pictures, and folds up after a few years. To a future historian of the movement it will be obvious that *Libertarian Forum* is of enormously more importance than *Libertarian Review*, but how many see that today, or saw it a couple of years back? Even the cadre builders tend to see themselves in the position of Lenin in 1903, whereas they ought to see themselves in the position of Marx in the 1860s.

### **SUPERFICIAL OPTIMISM CAUSES DESPAIR**

One of the penalties of the short-range perspective is that it leads to unnecessary disappointment and discouragement. Minor political developments are greeted as heralds of a new dawn, and when the black night of statism later shows no sign of abating, or when equally minor political developments (say, the election of a Benn government) seem to indicate a reversal, the libertarian feels that nothing can be done in present circumstances, or more crassly, that "nothing will ever change".

Some libertarians say that the performance of a Thatcher or a Reagan, administering the corporate state and chattering about the free market, will discredit the free market. In 1921 the "experiment" of communist central planning was a complete and humiliating failure, and was abandoned by the Russian government. Did that lead to the "discrediting" of Marxism and communism? There was far too much ideological steam behind Marxism for any "failure" to have much effect. There is today far too much ideological steam behind monetarism, anti-socialism and greater reliance on the market for six dozen Thatchers and Reagans to do much damage. Marxism was eventually comprehensively discredited by books and pamphlets. This was an autonomous development which would have been substantially the same if the performance of Marxist-Leninist regimes had been ten times better or (if that were conceivable) ten times worse.

Events like the "discrediting" of ideas because of the results of particular policies, the impressions made on journalists or on the results of public opinion polls, do not have much ef-

fect upon the long-term evolution of opinion, and are themselves volatile and easily reversed. To the politician who wants to see certain specific measures enacted within a year or two, these swirling eddies are all-important. But the propagandist, though observing and commenting upon them, must not let them determine his assessment of his own task. He certainly must not feel elated if they seem to be going his way, only then to be cast into despair if they seem to be going against him.

### **WE CAN SUCCEED**

One hundred years ago socialism was in the ascendency. It was an ideological juggernaut which no editorializing in newspapers or speech-making in Hyde Park could do anything to stop. Today, one is tempted to say that anti-socialism is a similar juggernaut, except that anti-socialism is a purely negative reaction. The movement of ideas now is less clearly defined — though perhaps it always becomes defined only in retrospect. There is no single coherent body of doctrine which is ready to sweep the world in the way that socialism did. It is possible that libertarianism could be turned into such a doctrine, or it is possible that some new madness connected with religion or race or nationality might suddenly catch fire, or it is possible that a pragmatic, liberal "greater reliance on market forces" might be incorporated into a supple form of statist oppression. The realization of the first of these possibilities is not guaranteed, but neither is it an unrealistic project.

### **A LONG-RANGE APPROACH**

The short-range perspective leads propagandists to try to sell libertarian ideas to the public. The long-range perspective leads propagandists to pursue small-scale but quality recruitment. The short-range perspective leads propagandists to under-play certain essential aspects of libertarian doctrine, in the fond hope that people can be seduced into a libertarian outlook by gentle nudges. The long-range propagandist actually relishes stating these aspects of libertarianism which will upset most of the general public, knowing that they will appeal to a certain type of intellectual with a bold and systematic turn of mind.

From a short-range standpoint, the present schisms and bitter controversies within the US movement are disastrous. From the long-range viewpoint they are very promising. The intellectual propagandist loves disputation and doctrinal turbulence just as surely as "the great mass of ordinary people" are indifferent to such matters.

The short-range perspective suffers from an uneasy confrontation between over-optimistic expectations and adaptation to the apparently pessimistic message of daily reality. Its adherents always consciously or unconsciously strive to present libertarianism as something it is not, because they are vaguely aware that what it is would not be liked, and they crave to be liked. According to their taste, they therefore want to present libertarianism as low-tax welfare-statism, a progressive revolutionary force, a revitalized Conservatism, a transformational lifestyle, the way young people are thinking nowadays, a sensible way of making a few efficient adjustments in the economy ... One of the unintended consequences of the short-range search for ideological disguises is that the short-range propagandist never actually gets any practice in arguing for the tricky or sensitive areas of the libertarian case and, compelled to do so, has recourse to exasperated moralizing.

### **THE WORK OF THE LA**

The long-range propagandist can face the reality that he is one of a small group of people endeavouring to spread, and also refine, a system of distinctive and not very popular ideas about society and politics. The propagandist is not discouraged at lack of visible progress in the arenas of politics or mass opinion. He is gratified by the visible progress in building up the small but increasingly effective propaganda group.

The group publishes a range of leaflets. These state the basic libertarian position on many issues, including those which are not very palatable to the public. (The leaflets will include ones on child labour laws, denationalization of the streets, immigration control, prostitution and gun control.) It publishes pamphlets, some of which develop the libertarian analysis in greater detail, others arguing positions controversial within the libertarian movement. It publishes a regular journal which does not simply put the libertarian case, but rather takes that for granted as a background to debates and comments. The group debates with all and sundry. It holds regular lectures and discussion meetings. It studies other propaganda groups from the points of view both of their ideas and their techniques of advancing those ideas. Its members turn up at other group's meetings to ask questions.

### **NO NEED FOR A LINE**

Among matters controversial within the libertarian movement, on which the group does not at this stage need to have a settled "line" are: the comparative merits of various economic methodologies (e.g. Austrian or Chicago), the ethical bases of libertarianism (e.g. natural rights or utilitarianism), foreign policy in the current world situation (e.g. unilateral disarmament or support for NATO), the political organization of a libertarian society (anarchism or minimal statism), the merits of particular productive techniques (e.g. nuclear generation of electricity), abortion and the rights of children. These are debated vigorously within the group, and it may be that in years to come some of the issues will be so clarified that a definite line is indicated. Or it may be that when the group is much bigger there will be room for more independent groups taking a definite stand on such questions, in addition to continuing the LA as the broad "alliance".

There is also a wide area of propaganda strategy on which no uniform line is necessary. For example, most members of the Libertarian Alliance are not members or supporters of any political party. There are a few LA members in each of several political parties. So far as we can judge, most are opposed to forming a libertarian political party, but a few would favour that. There is continuing debate about the merits of these strategies, and it would be quite inappropriate for the LA as an organization to rule which was the best. There are similar differences on the wisdom of working within various pressure groups, such as Amnesty International or the National Council for Civil Liberties.

### **OUR SHORT-TERM GOAL**

A reasonable goal for the LA over the next five to ten years is to build up a membership of one or two thousand dedicated, informed and well-organized libertarian propagandists. If we achieve that, we will already be making some appreciable impact upon society, and the situation may then have changed so that some of the above becomes inapplicable.