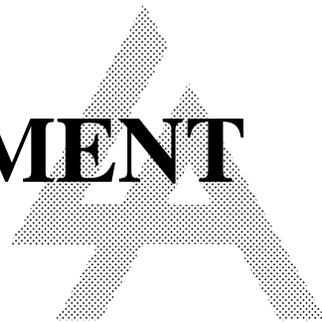


HOW TO WIN THE LIBERTARIAN ARGUMENT

BRIAN MICKLETHWAIT



The first rule for winning the libertarian argument is that you must have it.

That sounds fairly obvious, does it not? Yet how many times must we libertarians listen to self-styled “practical” and “realistic” comrades, who tell us that the way to argue for the abolition of income tax or the legalisation of heroin or the abolition of compulsory education is to start these arguments by arguing instead for the lowering of income tax by two per cent, the legalisation of marijuana, and the introduction of education vouchers. The idea is that having bought these mild and diluted versions of libertarianism, people will then be drawn into accepting the more “extreme” manifestations of libertarianism, as if being enticed into the back room of a pornography shop.

The error embodied in this kind of “realism” is the confusion between someone on the one hand being told an idea, and on the other hand *agreeing* with that idea. These are two absolutely distinct processes, and understanding this distinction is the beginning of wisdom as a libertarian propagandist. There are, to put the same point slightly differently, two ways of being an “extremist”. One consists of not only expressing one’s views with clarity but also of trying to combine this process with that of immediately being agreed with, of saying what you think and of saying why the person you are talking to has no excuse for thinking otherwise. This is obnoxious and counter-productive. Your victim will simply back away, and make a note to seek other conversational companions in the future. The *right* way to be an extremist is to say what you think and why, while absolutely *not* assuming that the person you are talking to has any sort of obligation to think likewise, and if anything while making it clear that you rather expect him not to. You think what you think, and he thinks what he thinks. And if he hasn’t told you already what he does think, then an obviously polite next step would be to ask him to talk about that. The two of you can then try to pin down more precisely how you disagree, assuming you do. It is possible to be an extremist without deviating from good manners, and that is how.

Another obvious way to present an “extreme” idea to somebody, in a form which does not grab him by the lapels

and shake him around and generally spoil his day, is to present that idea in writing. Publishing is, you could say, a branch of good manners. No matter how “extreme” is the opinion I may read in a pamphlet or magazine, I am never, so to speak, at its mercy. I can stop reading it at any moment, and so in the meantime I need not feel threatened or even discomforted by it. The number one task of the Libertarian Alliance is simply to get the libertarian case spread around - especially in writing of course - to *anyone* who is interested in it. *Whether any particular reader agrees or not doesn’t matter. The point is to spread the ideas.*

SPREADING AN IDEA WHILE OPPOSING IT

Often an “extreme” idea can be spread by someone who vehemently disagrees with it. Since many libertarian ideas are aimed at Marxists, and since some Marxists, for all their vices, do at least enjoy reading about political and philosophical ideas, libertarianism is now far better understood by the more thoughtful members of the Marxist sects than it is by “the public”. The consequence is that such Marxists are now helping to spread a real understanding of libertarianism to all whom they happen to discuss it with.

I recall an argument with a Marxist, in which I followed the rule of being understood rather than agreed with. With no great unpleasantness, the Marxist formed a far clearer idea of what libertarianism was than he’d had before (and liked it less than ever, of course). *He* then had an argument with his flat mate, and told this flat mate that the flat mate and I were made for each other, as we seemed to agree about everything. The flat mate and I duly met, to our mutual benefit. He turned out to be one of those “My God I thought I was the only one who thought like this” libertarians, of the type one is occasionally lucky enough to encounter and put out of his isolated misery but so seldom does. He happily gathered up a couple of armfuls of Libertarian Alliance literature, and quickly converted himself from a gut libertarian to a gut-and-brain libertarian. Thus, a crucial piece of pro-libertarian communication was achieved merely because one libertarian had taken the trouble, politely but with great “extremity”, to be understood by one *anti*-libertarian.

By the multiplication of such undetectable dramas as this, the libertarian message is well on the way to being *understood* by an amazingly large proportion of educated people with any interest in such matters.

SHIFTING THE MIDDLE GROUND

The effect of spreading libertarian ideas is to change the agenda of debate. It doesn’t immediately change the conclusions that people have already reached as a result of their previous thinking, but it does change what will from then on

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be thought about. The middle ground, in other words, shifts in a libertarian direction.

Once again, the larger, historical process can be illustrated at the level of the small conversational gathering. Suppose a group of people are talking about whether or not marijuana should be legalised, and on balance thinking that since marijuana may, they surmise, be harmful, it would probably be wiser not to legalise it. In such circumstances, all it takes is just one person to transform the conversation utterly. For if one person says that the issue is not harmfulness or lack of it, but the right of the individual to decide about harmfulness for himself, and that not only marijuana but also heroin should be legalised, then from then on it will be a totally different conversation, and a much more libertarian one. And that will be true even if the dissident is merely stirring it by introducing a libertarian viewpoint which he happens not to share. The dissident may, for example, be a Marxist schoolteacher trying desperately to get his vegetable-like charges to stop clock-watching and to start thinking.

People like Marxist school teachers, by the way, often respond with unexpected warmth to the notion of abolishing compulsory school attendance, if only because this would turn them from jailers into real teachers. That causes them to look again at libertarianism generally, the way they never would if all they were offered on the educational front was yet another tedious pamphlet on education vouchers, "academic standards", and so forth. Many Marxists become Marxists merely to make extremist mischief, and they make Marxist mischief only because unaware that there is any other kind of mischief to be made.

Another fine example of the beneficial influence of "extremism" is to be found in Nick Elliott's description of how the argument about libertarianism went on inside the old Federation of Conservative Students. See Libertarian Alliance Tactical Notes No. 3, *What To Do and What Not To Do*.

THE MYTH OF CONSENSUS

Much of the potency of "extremism" lies in the widely held but false idea that people have to agree about fundamental philosophical ideas in order to live peacefully together in society. This is not so. The world is full of people with wildly different views about the philosophical foundations of life, of the universe and of everything, yet on the whole they get along peacefully enough. Where there *are* major breaches of the peace, these are just as likely to be between peoples with near identical views on "the fundamentals" as between people without such philosophical affinities. Nevertheless, the myth persists that if the "ideological spectrum" is stretched too much, not only will this metaphorical spectrum break into metaphorical fragments, but that "society" itself will be shattered into real fragments, and that these real fragments will then attack one another. This picture is foolishness, but when someone in its grip confronts his first cheerfully anti-consensualist libertarian extremist, he is likely to react with something close to panic. He is also likely to bend over backwards to agree with as much of libertarianism as he can, so that the fabric of society may be preserved. The libertarian case need only be stated with clarity in a particular social milieu for this process to go into automatic effect.

Once the "consensualists" see the point of libertarianism, they will see also that liberty works fine, and that extreme ideological diversity is by no means the automatic threat to society that they had supposed. What matters is the *super-*

ficial rules that different ideological groups agree to accept in the meantime. Freedom - freedom in practice, that is - is deeply attractive to all sectarians. Even those groups who are in theory most determined to suppress freedom, such as Marxists, Moonies, fascists, Muslim fundamentalists, and so on, find themselves lapsing into libertarianism when it comes to their right to go on peddling their own propaganda, and each group will cheerfully surrender freedom to the others if that is the only way that it too can remain free.

WINNING BY NOT WINNING

Another way of phrasing all that I've been saying so far is this. Having stated what arguments you intend to win, don't try to win them straight away. The actual winning of arguments is one of those mystically oriental activities in which trying is best done by not trying.

When was the last time you *won* an argument, right there in front of you? When was the last time someone said to you: "By heavens! You're right about this, and I've been wrong about it all of my life, until you took the trouble to straighten me out. How can I possibly thank you? Let me, as a pitifully small token of my infinite gratitude, kiss your shoes."? Not recently, I would guess.

When did *you* last surrender to *somebody else* in an argument, on the spot. I can recall having done this a couple of times in my life, but the interesting thing is that on each occasion I later decided that my surrender was premature, and, in the privacy of my own mind, so to speak, I withdrew my surrender. I recall, for example, being persuaded - and admitting out loud - that marijuana is more dangerous than I had supposed, and that therefore the case for keeping it illegal was stronger than I had been arguing. Later I realised that the truth or otherwise of these assertions was beside the point. Safety was not the issue.

It's important not to confuse actual persuasion with mere point scoring, which usually only works if there are third parties present who will register the points. The person actually scored off is unlikely to be so impressed. That someone doesn't have his ideal riposte immediately available, at the top of his brain, as it were, doesn't mean that he won't think of it later, or in the meantime be convinced of anything except of his own relative slow wittedness, which has no bearing at all on the question of what is or is not true. The truth is not logically dependent upon the mere argumentative facility of those discussing it. Indeed, if your opponent can't immediately think of replies to your various sallies, you could do a lot worse than suggest a few counter-arguments against what you've said for him. Sir Karl Popper has done this, when disputing in print with Marxism. As he says, what does it prove if you "win" only against badly put or ill-remembered arguments? Surely you want to engage with the ideas you oppose at their most formidable and persuasive.

Many of those who say that they dislike arguing say it because they imagine that they have a duty to win arguments on the spot, score cheap points and so on, and that those whom they argue with will feel similarly obliged to push for victory, in other words that when people argue they *have* to be objectionable to each other. But once you have understood that the goal of argument should be, not one directional "conversion", but mutual comprehension then it becomes much more fun. Arguing is a lot like sex in this respect.

But be warned. Arguing, also like sex, is dangerous. You may, as Robert Nozick puts it in *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, be infected by the truth, that is, by the truth that the other person is telling you. If your cause means more to you than the truth, you would be happier not communicating effectively with others. The Libertarian Alliance is not interested in gathering converts of this feeble and ineffective kind. We consider being understood and opposed far preferable to being misunderstood and thus “agreed” with.

HAVING SET THE AGENDA, DON'T THEN INSIST ON SETTING THE AGENDA

So, the agenda has changed. You have planted a stronghold in the territory of the enemy, and he is now attacking it. You've argued, for example, that heroin should be legalised, and never having heard so outrageous an idea before, he can't get it out of his mind. At this point, switch from polite offence to polite defence. The pattern with all arguing is, first establish your camp, then cool it. Act, react. During the defending-the-camp phase you must do a tactical somersault and let the other person decide what is to be talked about.

For example. You've said you are a libertarian, and he's said he's not, and at that point you are letting him say what he wants, and he says something like: “What about El Salvador?” (Or Chile, or South Africa, or the “Third World”, or any place where “capitalism” is generally held to be doing less than brilliantly.) The *wrong* reply to that is the all too familiar “right wing” counter-blast: “What about Russia?” (Or Hong Kong, or West Germany, or any place where the argument for liberty is strong and the opponents of liberty have more or less given up.) All that “What about Russia?” does is convince the anti-libertarian that libertarianism has nothing to offer on the subject of El Salvador. The *right* answer to “What about El Salvador?” is: “Yes, what *about* El Salvador? *Tell me about it.*” Let *him* tell *you* what he wants to argue about, that is to say, while you decide the fundamental principles of the argument, let him decide what particular application of those principles the two of you then talk about. You decide that the argument is going to be about “capitalism”, and he decides that it's going to be about capitalism in El Salvador.

Several benefits follow. First, the argument continues. If, like me, you like arguing, your purpose is not served by you insisting on freedom in general and the badness of life in Russia in particular, and that El Salvador is irrelevant. It takes two to tango. Why should he enjoy a conversation whose agenda he had no say in shaping? The chances are he'll be away.

Second, you address your opponent on those topics that are of interest to *him*. This is always the trick with any kind of persuasion. First announce your product, and try to spin out the conversation about it. You do this by finding out what your audience wants, and you try to explain, if you can, why your product will supply this. In the case of El Salvador, find out what the man thinks is now wrong with El Salvador and explain how your ideas might improve things, and why his ideas might only be making things worse.

Third, you will learn things. One of the great problems of the propagandist is “research”, that is, discovering and deploying the relevant “facts”. One of the best places to find facts is in the pronouncements of your opponents. They are hardly going to deny these facts, having supplied them them-

selves. What you must do is argue that they don't prove what your opponents are saying they prove.

Recently, for example, I encountered the familiar complaint that capitalism spends fortunes on cars and fridges for the masses, but refuses to spend fortunes on *education* for the masses. Rather than getting bogged down in the details of exactly how true this is, I instead pointed out that insofar as it *is* true, this is because cars and fridges are made and sold in a free market, while “education” tends not to be. Which is an argument not for more government spending on education but for less. This “more money should go to education and less to cars and fridges” argument is a particular example of J. K. Galbraith's constantly recycled observation about the ubiquity of (a) private affluence and (b) public squalour. But is this, as Galbraith and millions of others hold, an argument for having less private affluence and more public squalour? Hardly. Take your opponent's facts, and deduce something different from them to what he is used to deducing. Using *your* facts isn't going to impress him. Using *his* just might make him think a bit. And you can't use his facts if you aren't willing to attend to what they are.

HOW PEOPLE REALLY THINK

This point about not expecting to win arguments on the spot is more than a matter of mere pride. The notion that one can “convince” somebody of the truth of libertarianism with one mere “argument” is rooted in a false model of how people think about political matters. Political thought is rooted not merely in “facts” but in contrasting “world views” or “models” of how the world is and how it ought to be improved.

Think back to how you first became a libertarian, if you did (or if you didn't, how you became what you did become). The chances are that no one “fact” was decisive, or that if there was one moment of “conversion”, this was merely the culminating point of a much more complex process of thought, involving many “facts”, concerning the rival merits of your old world view and the new one which you eventually switched to.

Speaking for myself I switched from vague socialism to un-vague libertarianism through thinking about education, the economy, architecture, foreign affairs, and a dozen other things I can't now recall, and no one “fact” from any of these different areas would have caused me to change my mind. It also mattered a lot to me that there was a libertarian *movement* that I could join, and which could read what I wrote (given that I already knew that I wanted to write) and which would ensure that I still had an abundance of like minded friends. The truth would not have been nearly so attractive if there had been no one to share it with. That may seem superficial, even illogical. Nevertheless, that is how it was. So I now try to remember that other people may accept (or resist) libertarianism for similarly “illogical” reasons. For some anti-libertarians it comes as a shattering revelation to learn that there actually are real live libertarians, and that we mean what we say. Until then they had assumed that people only believed in capitalism for the sake of their dividends. The mere *existence* of a sincere libertarian might for such a person be the decisive, conversion-inducing “fact”.

More generally, the fact that it takes many arguments rather than just one to win “the argument” with any particular opponent means that even if he *accepts* what you have just told him about El Salvador or education or fridges or whatever, he may still insist on remaining an anti-libertarian, at any

rate for the time being, and that you must accept this with good grace as the natural way of things.

One of my greatest objections to the mostly admirable Ayn Rand is that she never seemed to grasp this point about the way people arrive at their opinions, and hence about the proper way to try to change their opinions. Rand always insisted on the power of “reason”, or as I would prefer to put it, on the satisfaction of winning her arguments with one punch, on the spot. Apparently there was once an “argument” between Rand and Mrs Murray Rothbard. Mrs Rothbard dared to indicate that she believed in Christianity. Rand patiently explained why Mrs Rothbard was utterly and completely mistaken. Mrs Rothbard replied that although she saw the force of Rand’s arguments her religious views were unchanged. Rand promptly dismissed Mrs Rothbard as a hopeless case, impervious to “reason”. Not surprisingly, Ayn Rand became a very lonely old woman. (But notice that although this pamphlet explains what was wrong with Rand, it also explains what was so right about her. Although bad at conducting herself in the arguments she started *she did at least start them*. As an agenda shifter Rand was a genius.)

Rand’s woeful inadequacies in some aspects of the art of arguing and excellence in other aspects of it illustrate a general point about winning the libertarian argument, which is that the process is a team effort. For one libertarian on his own to “convert” someone else to libertarianism, without any help from any other libertarian or any other argument from anybody else, is an unimaginably rare event which negates the very idea of civilisation, and of any sort of shared intellectual culture. As I have written elsewhere (in Libertarian Alliance Cultural Notes No. 15, *Design as Outcome*), to understand in detail how any particular enterprise is conducted is simultaneously to understand how that enterprise may be shared between different people. As with design so with arguing. Many of my long suffering conversational friends will for some time now, while reading this, have been muttering to themselves that I am a lot better at preaching politeness than I am at practising it.

You, by contrast, although perhaps less good than me at proclaiming the libertarian message, may have a particular willingness or talent for *distributing* it, or for organising meetings at which libertarianism is proclaimed. You may excell at translating libertarian ideas from something sounding extreme to something which sounds moderate and unthreatening. Or perhaps you contribute crucially to the cause simply by (a) calling yourself a libertarian when asked what you are but not otherwise, and (b) being a nice person in all other respects. By merely proving that libertarianism and decency can cohere in the same personality, you will be a walking advertisement for the cause, as I might not be.

Most especially, there are now many libertarians who excell in the ancient and by no means entirely ignoble art of crawling, and who are thereby inserting themselves inside organisations which might expell them if they went on about libertarianism all the time the way I do. Then, when the opportune moment arises, mealy-mouthed centre-rightist or left-anarchist Clark Kent sets aside his spectacles, and anarcho-capitalist Superman steps forward! People with plans like this would be useless without people like me, because the opportune moment would never arrive. But nor would people like me count for so much without people like them. Personally, I think that things would be greatly improved if more people were prepared to flaunt their red underpants on a permanent basis, for reasons which I have already ex-

plained. But in the end, people do what they want to do. A Clark Kent libertarian certainly has his uses, and is undoubtedly an improvement on no libertarian at all.

THE VALUE OF REPETITION

Those who have read other Libertarian Alliance writings of mine besides this one may perhaps feel that they have heard some of the things in this piece before. If so, they feel correctly. (See in particular my Tactical Notes No. 7, *The Tyranny of The Facts*, and my closing comment in Political Notes No. 42, *A Conservative Manifesto for Scotland* by Antoine Clark and Tim Evans.) So it makes sense for me to end this piece by noting the value of sheer repetition, a point so closely related to what I’ve been saying above as almost itself to be a repetition.

I said in Tactical Notes 7, and have repeated here, that people do not form their view of a political event or policy or cultural object on the basis of only one small set of facts, but decide about particular issues in the light of their total world view. Not only that, a person’s world view determines whether he or she is interested at all in any particular argument or item or fact. The chances are that hardly any of what you say will even be registered by your reader (or conversational companion) and that most of what *is* registered will soon be forgotten. There’s no particular dishonour involved here; this is just life. We all experience far too much in our lives to remember all of it, and most of what we experience means virtually nothing to us, because it has no bearing on the few matters about which we are thinking seriously. Accordingly, any propaganda enterprise must get used to repeating its message. This is true for the entire enterprise, and it is true for its individual members. I don’t mean that you should say the same thing four times within ten minutes, although even this kind of repetition can sometimes be necessary. I mean merely that you may have to say the same thing week after week, or in pamphlet after pamphlet, before it gets properly attended to. Many will *hear* your message time after time, but only at the thirtieth hearing will they *receive* it and *take it in* and attach it to their slowly developing and changing world view, which is only then ready to accept what you have been saying. Expecting to have to say everything only once is a variety of the I-want-to-win-with-only-one-punch arrogance that Ayn Rand indulged in. But even Rand did the important things right, because she did at least understand the value of getting things published, that is, mass produced and able to repeat themselves by being read again and again, even if she herself had no patience for repeating things verbally.

For the same reason, it really doesn’t matter if you have some great idea for a piece of libertarian writing, but then come across someone else saying it before you got around to writing it. He probably wasn’t the first to think of it either, and you should write the piece anyway, again, in your own words. If it was worth saying once, it’s worth saying again. Something about how you phrase the point will probably cause some readers to take it in for the first time, despite having heard it or read it several times before in other forms but without registering it. Would-be Libertarian Alliance writers please note, and don’t be surprised to read that point again, in another edition of Tactical Notes I have in mind to do, about how to write for the Libertarian Alliance. Indeed, if the significance of repetition as a technique of persuasion interests you sufficiently, you might care to rephrase the thought yourself, in yet another LA publication.