

THE LIBERTARIAN PARTY OF GREAT BRITAIN: AN IDEA WHOSE TIME HAS NOT COME



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A BRITISH LIBERTARIAN PARTY: THE CONTINUING DEBATE

The corporate authors of one of the Libertarian Alliance's very first pamphlets, *Purpose and Strategy of the Libertarian Alliance* (Libertarian Alliance, 1981), without explicitly standing against a British libertarian party, nonetheless expressly condemned a short-term and populist approach to evangelising the libertarian cause, favouring instead to target a much smaller number of key opinion-formers in various fields. As such, a libertarian party, functioning as a normal party which regarded fighting elections as its primary activity, was to be opposed on the grounds that this was an example of this type of short-term populism aimed directly at the masses and which was wasteful of time, energy and money.

The unsuccessful 1980 Presidential Election campaign by Ed Clark and the Libertarian Party of the United States of America (LP/USA) was cited, in particular with reference to the unjustified optimism demonstrated by some libertarians and the inevitable disillusionment that followed.

However, more recently, following his own experiences in the May 1997 local elections in London, Antoine Clarke, the editor of *Tanstaaf Times*, considered again the formation of some form of libertarian party to actually fight elections (Clarke, 1998). He also noted a recent publication jointly produced by authors from the polling company MORI and the free-market think-tank the IEA (Blundell & Gosschalk, 1997), presumably for their findings (p. 13) that 19% of the electorate could be classified as 'libertarian'.

For the remainder of this essay I wish to do a number of things:

- To examine the ideological stance of extant political parties in Britain.
- To note the election record of the LP/USA both before and since the 1980 Presidential Elections.
- To assess the validity of claims about the current ideological stance of the British electorate.
- To note survey research data which affords some indication of the degree of libertarianism amongst the British public.
- To assess from all this whether or not there is a valid case to be made for an active libertarian party in Britain at the present.



Tactical Notes No. 22



ISSN 0268-2923 ISBN 1 85637 432 7

An occasional publication of the Libertarian Alliance,
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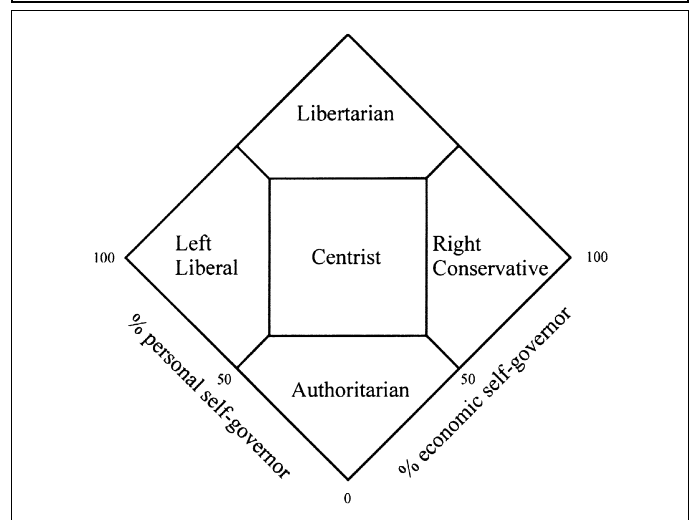
FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

THE IDEOLOGY OF CONTEMPORARY BRITISH POLITICAL PARTIES

Whilst it may appear self-evidently true that there are no libertarian political parties already operating in Britain, it would seem as well to analyse this hypothesis rather more objectively before considering the need for creating one.

To do this I refer to research that I carried out myself recently for an as yet unpublished dissertation for the MA Applied Social and Market Research at the University of Westminster (Meek, 1998). In this I used the same model of ideology as Blundell and Gosschalk (1997), i.e. one which works by separating 'personal' and 'economic' matters into two axes (see Bergland, 1993: p. 32; Lester, 1995; *Advocates for Self-Government*, 1995). This leads to a diamond-shaped chart, generally known as the Political Compass, with five internal ideological sectors or groupings:

Figure 1: The Political Compass (AfSG, 1995)



The five ideological groupings can be characterised as:

- Rightist, who believe in individual economic choice but collective personal choice.
- Leftist, who believe in collective economic choice but individual personal choice.
- Libertarian, who believe in individual choice in both.
- Authoritarian, who believe in collective choice in both.
- Centrist, who are indeterminate or moderate in both.

I operationalised this model by the construction of an additive scale along both dimensions based upon previous questionnaire sets and the issues raised in the parties' 1997 general election manifestos. The actual analysis was conducted by the use of a 'simulation of interview' variant of content analysis (Krippendorff, 1980: pp. 79-80; Wimmer and Dominick, pp. 110-135) on the 1997 general election manifestos or similar documents.

I should note that I also discuss some of the flaws and limitations of this model, but for the purposes of this essay it suffices.

My key relevant findings were:

- All three major British parties — the Labour Party, the Conservative Party, and the Liberal Democrats — plus the two other major mainland British parties with MPs — the Scottish National Party and Plaid Cymru — were located in the Centrist sector.
- Many of the remaining political parties could be located in the Leftist sector but near the border with the Centrist sector (i.e. the 'centre-left').
- That of the remaining small parties, almost all of them were either at or near the edge of the Leftist sector (i.e. the 'far

left') or were located in the Authoritarian sector (i.e. those parties inaccurately termed 'far right')

- That no British party was located in the Libertarian sector, nor even in the Rightist sector except perhaps one small organisation that straddled the Centrist border.
- That taking all these points together, there is a very clear political-electoral mainstream in this country which is best described as centrist tending to centre-left.

In other words there is indeed no libertarian party currently operating in Britain. However, in which case it should be noted that over 95% of those that voted on the 1st May 1997 were content to do so for centre or centre-left parties (Electoral Reform Society, 1997). In other words, it seems that only political parties with an essentially centrist programme currently stand any chance of receiving substantial public support at elections.

Incidentally, the editor of the LA's *Free Life* and *Free Life Commentary*, Sean Gabb, recently noted that some LA supporters have become much taken with Mr Blair and New Labour (Gabb, 1998: p. 3). If Labour's manifesto is anything to go by, such enthusiasm is mistaken.

AN ELECTORAL HISTORY OF THE LIBERTARIAN PARTY OF THE USA FROM 1972

If we examine the 'headline' voting figures for the LP/USA, i.e. its performance in the various Presidential elections since 1972 (the LP/USA being formed in 1971 (LP/USA, 1995)), we discover that Ed Clark's 1980 campaign — the very one that the LA was deriding a year later as a failure — was in fact the high-water mark of the party's electoral performance to date.

Taking the overall turnout and comparing it with the LP/USA's various candidates' votes we arrive at the following:

Table 1: The Total Turnout and the LP/USA's Vote in USA Presidential Elections Since 1972
(source: Federal Election Commission, 1998; LP/USA, 1998)

	1972	1976	1980	1984	1988	1992	1996
Total Turnout	77718554	81555789	86515221	92652,80	91594693	104405155	96456345
LP Vote (actual)	3907	174199	921199	228705	432297	291627	485120
LP Vote (%)	0.005	0.214	1.065	0.247	0.472	0.279	0.503

Excepting the 1972 election at which the LP/USA managed to get on the ballot of only a very few states, and the 1980 election at which Ed Clarke just managed to scrape 1% of the vote, the LP/USA's share of the vote has consistently been between just one-fifth and one-half of one percent over the last two decades.

It is certainly true that the LP/USA has a number of elected officials across the USA. But it is equally clear that (i) they tend to be of the most minor sort, and (ii) there appears to be a tendency for the LP/USA to come third, and often a distant third at that, behind Republican and Democrat candidates in partisan, three-cornered contests (LP/USA, 1998).

In other words, in over a quarter of a century of often highly professional and dedicated campaigning amongst the general public, the LP/USA has got virtually nowhere in terms of actually getting its hands on the levers of political power by this direct electoral route.

DOES A LIBERTARIAN 'CONSTITUENCY' ALREADY EXIST AMONGST THE BRITISH ELECTORATE?

I have already referred to the claim made by Blundell and Gosschalk (1997: p. 13) that almost one-fifth of the British electorate could be described as 'libertarian'. As might be imagined, this caused considerable excitement amongst some libertarians in Britain.

By necessity, in my dissertation I spend quite some time analysing previous operationalisations of the Political Compass and, al-

beit deliberately rather obliquely, offer some criticisms. To now be rather more explicit, I believe that Blundell and Gosschalk's work is flawed and that its results do not stand up to scrutiny.

I have no wish to turn this into a wholesale critique of Blundell and Gosschalk's work — and I have to say that I know Mr Gosschalk personally and he has shown me some kindness in the past — but amongst the flaws that I identified, especially in their questionnaire set (see p. 72), were:

- They make little use of first-order references (p. 78).
- They do not clearly define the constructs of 'personal' and 'economic'. See Bergland, 1993: p. 32
- It is not obvious how they went about designing the questionnaire set that they used, i.e. the inclusion or exclusion of this or that issue.
- There is confusion between normative (ought/ought not) and positive (is/is not) statements, e.g. Q8 and Q1. See Flew, 1991: pp. 204-205; Danziger, 1998: pp. 109-110.
- On occasion they are just plain wrong: they seem to think that the government coercing workers into paying into a compulsory private pension scheme is 'libertarian'. (Q9).
- There is confusion between absolute criteria (i.e. measured against some universal criteria in time and space) and relative criteria (i.e. measured against some fixed point in time and space, in this case the general social, economic, legal etc. state of things in Britain in 1997). For example, wanting to decriminalise cannabis gets the respondent 'full marks' as a libertarian (Q11) but there is no mention of heroin or cocaine. See, for example, Hayek, 1960: p. 399; Evans, Health and Lalljee, 1996: p. 97.
- There is the dubious use of 'hot topic' issues which are of unclear relevance to the Political Compass model and/or are symbols for a whole range of issues, e.g. Q10 and Q14 about EMU and the EU respectively.

As a result I believe that the proportion of respondents that they located in the libertarian sector, 19%, is very much overstated. It seems just too easy to get a libertarian score and the whole enterprise reads like it has been designed by ideological moderates and pragmatists with little understanding of political extremism, of which proper libertarianism is certainly an example.

If any libertarian reading this remains unconvinced, try this mental exercise. Think of what real libertarianism means. If you have read some of them, recall those LA pamphlets that have, amongst other things, called for:

- The legalisation of all narcotic drugs.
- The privatisation of roads
- The right of individuals to own any amount of guns.
- The disestablishment of the whole welfare state: the NHS, state education, state pensions, the lot.
- The privatisation of the police.
- The production of money to be denationalised.
- The right of individuals to hammer nails into the scrotums of other willing individuals.
- An end to all legal prohibition of the right to discriminate due to gender, race, sexuality or any other reason.

Do you still think that one-fifth of the British public — or indeed any nation's public — agrees with that genuinely libertarian agenda? That, of course, is a rhetorical question. Surely no reader thinks that the answer is 'yes'?

If the reader is *still* not convinced, then go and read something about the history of the Socialist Workers Party and/or the British National Party and *their* great electoral successes (*sic*). Although

getting rather out of date now, Paul Mercer's superb *Directory of British Political Organisations 1994* (Mercer, 1994) is a good place to read and ponder at the fate of these and other smaller, extreme parties.

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT WHAT THE BRITISH PUBLIC'S ATTITUDES ACTUALLY ARE?

Having established that the evidence that a substantial proportion of the British public are libertarians is unreliable, and that furthermore no true libertarian who routinely interacts with non-libertarians can possibly believe that the latter would really support an honest libertarian agenda if it was laid before them, just what is it the positive evidence about what the British public *do* think?

The British public is a well-researched audience, with any amount of commercial and non-commercial organisations canvassing their opinions on almost every conceivable subject. One of the most widely-cited surveys is the British Social Attitudes study run annually by Social and Community Planning Research. I have selected a few questions from the most recently-published 1997/98 edition (Jowell et al, 1997).

Tables 2, 3 and 4: General Government Spending and Welfare

Q212 Here are some items of government spending. Which of them, if any, would be your highest priority for extra spending? Please read through the whole list before deciding. (p. 253)

Area of Government Spending	%
Education	27.6
Defence	0.5
Health	54.4
Housing	3.8
Public transport	2.0
Roads	1.1
Police and prisons	3.4
Social security benefits	2.9
Help for industry	3.5
Overseas aid	0.2
None of these	0.1
Don't know/refusal	0.4

Q218 Suppose the government had to choose between the three options on this card. Which do you think it should choose? (p. 254)

Option	%
Reduce taxes and spend less on health, education and social benefits	3.9
Keep taxes and spending on these services at the same level as now	33.6
Increase taxes and spend more of health, education and social benefits	59.3
None/Don't Know/Refusal	3.2

Q231 It has been suggested that the National Health Service should be available only to those with lower incomes. This would mean that contributions and taxes could be lower and most people could then take out medical insurance or pay for health care. Do you support or oppose this idea? (p. 256)

Response	%
Support a lot	7.4
Support a little	13.4
Oppose a little	15.9
Oppose a lot	61.2
Don't know/refusal	2.1

With only 0.1% choosing the prompted response of no increase in government spending (Q212), and only 3.9% choosing an option of reducing taxes and cutting welfare spending (Q218), and a total of 77.1% indicating support for an NHS which is not merely a welfare-capitalist 'safety-net' but appears to be an engine of socialist egalitarianism (Q231) (Marsland, 1996: p. 19), this does not seem like a libertarian-inclined electorate.

Table 5: The Role of Government

Q2.12 (self-completion) On the whole, do you think it should or should not be the government's responsibility to ... (p. 322)

	Definitely/ probably should should be (%)	Definitely/ probably should should not be (%)	Can't choose/NA (%)
... provide a job for everyone who wants one	65.0	29.4	5.5
... keep prices under control	81.7	14.3	4.1
... provide health care for the sick	96.8	1.5	1.8
... provide a decent standard of living for the unemployed	95.2	2.6	2.3
... provide industry with the help it needs to grow	87.7	6.9	5.3
... provide a decent standard of living for the unemployed	72.5	20.8	6.7
... reduce income differences between rich and poor	62.5	30.3	7.2
... give financial assistance to university students from low-income families	85.7	9.6	4.7
... provide decent housing for those who can't afford it	83.8	10.3	5.8
... impose strict laws to make industry do less damage to the environment	89.8	4.9	5.3

In every case in Q2.12 there is a huge majority in favour of state intervention, including in matters of wealth-creation. The 'best' results being that 'only' just under two-thirds (62.5% and 65% respectively) of the respondents believe that it is a legitimate role of government to equalise incomes and provide everyone with a job.

It might be objected that there is a degree of bias in the questionnaire wording, particularly in Q2.12 and this I accept: later on (Q2.50, p. 330) respondents display concern over some of the possible negative consequences of the welfare state when a different form of wording is used. Also it might be suggested that I have simply gone through the 104 pages of the top-line questionnaire and cherry-picked the questions that support my argument. There may, perhaps, be some truth in this as well. Nonetheless I contend that the preceding clearly indicate a British public that overwhelmingly believes in government intervention *as a positive good*: no 'night-watchman state' here!

Tables 6 and 7: Pornography and Censorship

Q2.44 (self-completion) What one of these two statements come closer to your own view? (p. 328)				
	%			
Adults should be allowed to see whatever films they like, even if the film shows a lot of violence or pornography	31.5			
Some films are too violent to be available even to adults	59.2			
Can't choose/NA	9.4			

Q2.51 (self-completion) Please tick one box for ... [the] statement below to show how much you agree or disagree with it. (p. 330)				
	Agree (%)	Neither agree nor disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	DK/NA (%)
Censorship of films and magazines is necessary to uphold moral standards	66.0	15.2	17.0	1.8

The BSA study asks relatively few questions about personal matters, but the figures from Q2.44 and Q2.51 are hardly encouraging from a libertarian perspective, particularly the latter. Indeed, I would hypothesise that the actual situation is even worse, since I suspect that by 'pornography' many of the respondents may have been thinking about a few bare bottoms on late night television: remember the *Daily Mail's* hysterical campaign against former Channel 4 Chief Executive Michael Grade who they labelled 'Britain's pornographer-in-chief'?

I could go on and bring in much more material from other sources, but all I wanted to do was to demonstrate that there is little favour for genuine libertarianism amongst the general public in Britain; or rather that there is a very great deal of enthusiasm for socio-economic authoritarianism and interventionism.

CONCLUSION: NO CASE FOR A BRITISH LIBERTARIAN PARTY — AT THE MOMENT

I hope I have gone some way in convincing the reader of the following:

- That there is no political party, large or small, with a published manifesto and currently operating in Britain, which can be described as libertarian.
- That the general political attitudes of the British public are highly antipathetic towards libertarianism, but strongly supportive of active collectivism instead.
- That, starting from this position of unpopularity, straightforward libertarian political parties which appeal directly to the electorate appear to be very ineffectual instruments for substantially increasing support for libertarianism.

However we are to bring about the libertarian world that we want, the authors of *Strategy and Purpose of the Libertarian Alliance* surely had it right all those years ago: it will take a great deal of time, direct appeals to the ordinary electorate are wasteful, and we need to concentrate our efforts towards the key opinion-formers in areas such as the media, politics, industry, organised labour, academia, and the arts.

Which brings me back to the title of this essay which readers with a good memory will recall is *The Libertarian Party of Great Britain: An Idea Whose Time Has NOT Come*, and not *The Libertarian Party of Great Britain: An Idea That Could Only Be Promulgated By Splitists and Enemies of the People*. In the (regrettably distant) future there may well be a role — perhaps a necessity — for a British libertarian party in the same way that there was a role for the Labour Party in 1945 or the Conservative

Party in 1979: as the political repository of the will of a sufficiently large number of *already-convinced* people. For whilst libertarianism must first win the battle in the market-place of ideas, unless we are to follow the (undeniably noble) route of non-parliamentary voluntarism (e.g. *Voluntaryist*, 1998), it will require libertarian MPs — whether Libertarians or libertarian sympathisers in other parties — to repeal, in a sensible fashion that does not cause massive social chaos, already-existing non-libertarian laws and programmes. But that is a long time away.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Mr Martin Bowman, for assistance in drawing the Political Compass diagram in Figure 1.

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