

On May 1st 1999, the “inaugural convention” of the Independent Libertarian Party was held, in Hampstead, North London. Not many present. So, now we have it. A British attempt at a libertarian political party. I fear that this will do little good and maybe much harm. However, ILP founder Antoine Clarke also wants his small band of followers not to get carried away, and in in this spirit of caution I was invited to voice some of my doubts to this first ILP meeting. I did so. But because that same weekend there was a Libertarian Alliance mailing going out, the preparations for which I take more seriously than preparing to talk to the ILP, my talk was, I fear, rather scrappy and insufficient. I voiced some of my doubts but nothing like all of them, and what I did say I hurried through, because they’d already been sitting there for several hours and needed to get out into the May sunshine. So this is a what-I-might-have-said rather than a what-I-did-say piece.

SHORT-TERM OPTIMISM

As I say, Antoine Clarke isn’t expecting huge short-term impact. If he did, this would be a great folly. Setting lots of public targets for “success” would set in motion all the disastrous dynamics which have wrecked libertarian parties elsewhere. (I’m thinking especially of Australia and Canada.) Believing that your little libertarian party will at once sweep the nation means believing that millions of people “out there” are already libertarians. They aren’t. But by the time you realise this, optimistic fools have assembled, all expecting instant electoral impact. Some particularly annoying fool then says that, since the voters aren’t moving towards libertarianism, the “libertarian” party should instead move towards the voters. Drugs legalisation starts to be *opposed*, tax *increases* suggested, immigration controls *praised*, to “correct the wrong idea that the public has about libertarianism”. At which point this “libertarian” party starts to do serious harm to the libertarian movement as a whole. This is especially true if, like the ILP, the party’s title includes the word “libertarian”. The venomous hostility expressed towards the idea of a libertarian political party by Libertarian Alliance Director Chris Tame over the years, and echoed by me, is based mainly on the fear of the above scenario.

Whatever happens, I anticipate that ILP people will in the years to come say that the Libertarian Alliance has a “duty” to help the

ILP, and to urge Libertarian Alliance subscribers to devote themselves to the ILP cause. Be warned. No such exhortations from the Libertarian Alliance to its subscribers should be expected. Only help the ILP if you personally would be entertained or advantaged by doing so, i.e. if you are one of those freaks who actually likes canvassing, shoving leaflets into the hands of irritated strangers, etc. The idea that you have a “duty as a libertarian” to do things for the ILP that will neither amuse nor enrich you is the sort of guilt-trip nonsense you get from all political parties, and libertarians especially should ignore such notions. If on the other hand, the ILP runs decent chess tournaments or a good squash ladder, fine. Pick out the stuff you like and ignore the rest, just as you would in Harrods.

Antoine Clarke now understands how the word libertarian might be poisoned by short-term ILP optimism, which is why he got me to give that talk. I hope he also understands just how reluctant will be the help he can expect from the Libertarian Alliance, and just how completely he will be depending on the efforts of himself and of his own members. And I hope this piece gets around among them, so that they do as well.

As far as Antoine is concerned, the ILP is like the LA. It is for spreading libertarian ideas, and only many decades hence if at all will it “sweep to power”. Thus, when I arrived at that May 1st meeting, hoping to have avoided all the internal party nonsense, I found myself sitting in on a discussion of the 23 point ILP “Party Platform”, which is to nail down what the ILP stands for, and to prevent idiots doing vote-grabs by saying something that most libertarians don’t believe in. You have, I presume, to sign up to this document before you can stand as an ILP candidate.

Antoine also understands — at any rate to hear him talk now — that whether the ILP ever does “sweep to power” depends not only on how well libertarianism does in the years to come but also on how many libertarian ideas the other parties steal, and that when one of the other parties *does* “steal” a libertarian idea or policy, this is, from the libertarian point of view, a *good thing*. Vote-obsessed “libertarians” are liable to curse instead of praise such policy theft, that is, they are liable to get all excited about their mere electoral methods and entirely to forget their aim — or what should be their aim — namely the success not of their mere party but of their ideas and policies.


Antoine says¹ that he’s learned from both the failures and the successes of the American Libertarian Party. They self-inflicted all manner of the horrors described above and below, but now seem like a relatively intelligent operation, which makes some contribution to the spread of libertarian ideas, not just in America but, thanks to the Internet, everywhere. (Whether the American LP’s achievements have been worth all the grief is another matter.)

HOW PARTY POLITICS STOPS THE SPREAD OF IDEAS

Getting back to that “platform”, even if everyone with any power within a libertarian political party is determined to remain ideologically sound, there is room for endless debate about what exactly ideological soundness means. It won’t be enough for the ILP to be in favour of “legalising all drugs”. Which ones first? All of them? Everywhere? (The ILP platform which I saw spoke of drugs only in privately owned places.) Just how strongly do you emphasise the unpopular stuff? Do you blaze it to the heavens, or do you evade, switching attention to safer and more popular stuff like small tax cuts?

What order do you do things in? The ILP platform says that welfare reduction and the relaxation of immigration controls should go hand in hand. But what of relaxing immigration controls without welfare reduction, if someone else suggests that? And in the impossibly unlikely event of the ILP actually becoming the government, what will it do about enforcing all those laws which it does not at once repeal?

Disagreements about foreign policy are particularly likely. Many libertarians are isolationist, but not all. The isolationist stance of the American Libertarian Party has caused many with otherwise



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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

impeccably libertarian views to say: “We’re not libertarians if that’s what libertarianism means.”

“Privatisation” is a minefield, as the Conservative Party has finally realised. Selling off government assets sounds good, but what if they are sold at very low prices to very well connected persons? What if prisons are “privatised”, but if the amount of “business” these prisons do depends on drugs remaining illegal, and if the prison owners therefore become lobbyists for drug non-legalisation, and indeed for the non-abolition and further creation of victimless crimes generally? This is the “efficiency experts for the state” objection to many apparently libertarian policies. Somewhere between spreading enthusiasm for life, liberty and property and applauding when businesses compete for the contract to supply poison gas to the government’s Population Purity Department, lines must be drawn. But where, exactly?

The Libertarian Alliance has no problem with such disagreements, indeed we exist to publicise them. The way to spread ideas is to argue about them. The Libertarian Alliance is a publishing enterprise not a political party. We have hosted in our pamphlets, as it were, debates about foreign policy, “imposed toleration”, the nature of libertarian rights, free will versus determinism, and many others, including, as here, the wisdom or lack of it of libertarian party politics. It all adds to the fun and the interest. Better still, there’s no time limit for these debates.

In party politics, on the other hand, a successions of dates and deadlines constantly leap out at you, in the form of elections and all their associated deadlines, by which time candidates must have declared themselves, gathered signatures, paid money to the government, raised that money (in huge amounts compared to what running something like the LA costs), and so on and so forth. In such circumstances those who insist on voicing disagreement with the party’s public policy on this or that issue will not be popular.

Spreading ideas of any sort means clarifying what these ideas are, and the search for clarity by its nature causes arguments. In party politics, serious argument in the ranks is discouraged, because it undermines the unity of the party effort and causes factions to form. As I say, that 23 point Platform was about what was *agreed about*. What libertarians didn’t agree about got cut out. Worse, an atmosphere of actual hostility to ideas is liable to be established, because ideas are divisive. Party politics tends to be dominated by people one of whose most important tasks is to smooth over fundamental intellectual differences amongst their followers with vacuous verbal formulae that all listeners can applaud, even as they comfort themselves by each silently interpreting the words in their own utterly contradictory ways. The illusion of unity — and the illusion that ideas are being spread when all that is really happening is that words are being destroyed — is preserved. Maybe Antoine Clarke does not now want to behave like this, but he may soon be doing so despite himself.

THE PRISON OF PARTY POLITICS

An extra dimension of frenzy is added to the internal workings of political parties by the widespread agreement, even among people who disagree about everything else, that there must be only one party of the sort they each want.

In normal life, if you don’t like some arrangement or deal you have become involved in, you walk away from it as soon as you can. You look elsewhere for that coat you wanted. You don’t renew that contract. You keep looking for your ideal job. But in politics, dissidents tend to stick around and fight their corner.

It’s the difference between living in a free world and living in a prison, and we all know how badly prison inmates can sometimes treat each other. But my point here is that prisons are not just imposed upon people by hostile outsiders who are punishing them; they can be self-imposed by groups of people who are determined to remain in contact with each other, even though they are only doing this in order to defeat each other and to seize territory or brand loyalty or supporters from one another.

The Libertarian Alliance, by contrast, is an unashamed despotism. Director Chris R. Tame owns it in its entirety. If you don’t like how he runs it, leave. If your voice is ignored, then exit. That we have “subscribers” rather than “members” avoids even the suggestion that these people have any voting rights. They are buying a product that they like. They are voting with their wallets, but can only vote against what the LA does by abstaining. If you want what you think would be a better libertarian enterprise, try to find one, or failing that start your own. The more the merrier.²

But those involved in a libertarian political party won’t just disappear without a fight and set up another if they don’t get their way in some faction fight. Setting up a new small business or charity with just you, two of your mates and half an office is standard practice. That’s how the free world works. But if you and your mates walk away from a political party and set up another, that’s ridiculous, especially if these various *groupuscules* all have the word “libertarian” in their various titles.

At that May 1st inaugural convention, this claim was contested. It was pointed out that about a hundred years ago, when socialism was getting into its political stride, the socialists (who at least did a fine job of spreading socialism) ran numerous socialist political parties. True, but not many of these people were doing this on purpose. Yes, defeated socialist fragments marched out of meetings in disgust and formed new parties, but not before they’d had ferocious fights with their socialist rivals. And true, many of them probably preferred small pie-in-the-sky political parties to big bread-and-butter with a bit of jam-today political parties. And true, the proliferation of small socialist parties may well have ended up helping to spread socialism. And true, many of those attracted to something like the ILP now are *definitely* attracted to small pie-in-the-sky political parties. If they’ve done it once, why not again? Libertarian Workers Party. Libertarian Green Party (see Mark Ledbetter’s “get cars off welfare” stuff for their manifesto). The Capitalist Party. The Anti-Statist League. The Progress Through Liberty Party. The Even More Independent Libertarian (January 1st 2001) Party.

But I think my point stands. The free life is about variety and separation. We all go our different ways and plough our distinct furrows, in self-selected, self-assembled teams, big or small, reputable or despised, famous or obscure, or on our own, and all involved know this. The political life, on the other hand, is about everyone ganging together and thrashing things out collectively, and all involved know *this*. Walking away from unpleasantness instead of staying and making it ten times worse is thus, in a basic definitional sense, the opposite of politics.

It is certainly the opposite of successful politics. Even the smallest political party has to at least threaten — at least *imagine* — that it will one day get big, that it will one day have internal rows that you can only win by winning them.

DEMOCRACY

So political parties *are* prisons, in the sense that everyone who’s serious about them has to stick around in each other’s company. And when, in a prison, decisions *have* to be made, and what’s more *made in a hurry*, some form of despotism will inevitably arise. At present Antoine intends to be his own despot in the ILP (without being nearly as brazen about it as Chris Tame is about his despotic control of the Libertarian Alliance). But even at that May 1st meeting the first concessions to that other variety of despotism — democracy — were already being hinted at by the Great Leader. The ILP’s platform was going to be “difficult” to change, but in principle, members could vote to change it. So which members, exactly? How long will they have to have been members? Will they have to swear to some sort of ideological soundness oath? And what if, when voting, they ignore the content of such oaths?

The tendency nowadays is to sentimentalise democracy, to speak of “democratic” decisions as especially nice and virtuous ones. But no one with any direct experience of democracy could poss-

ibly go on believing nonsense like that. Democracy, whether it concerns the government of a huge nation or of a tiny Bridge Club, is a nasty, back-stabbing, dishonest, corrupt business.

Unlike true owners, or true despots, democratically elected despots can't assume that they'll be there in the long run, so a general atmosphere of grab-it-and-run pervades democracy, especially as the life of a particular democratic regime is approaching its end. Democracy puts the people who do most of the work at the mercy of others who only sit around voting about what shall be done with the proceeds of this work. That naturally causes the people doing the work to try to rig the voting to get the decisions they want, and that causes yet more nastiness. Democracy turns seemingly life-long friends into sworn enemies.

The true case for democracy is much simpler: democracy is, on the whole, better than a pitched battle.

Democracy is plainly not the same thing as liberty, yet even many libertarians favour it for selecting national governments. I do myself. It is widely if wrongly agreed by my fellow Brits that there has to be this huge governmental machine messing my country about and gobbling up half its resources, so there's bound to be a never-ending row about who shall control this massive machine. Democracy says that this row must take the form of regular elections rather than occasional civil wars.

But just because the consequences of democracy are relatively benign, don't kid yourself that democratic decision-making, close-up, is *nice*. The language of democracy is relentlessly military, and democracy's very savagery is all part of why it works as smoothly — if as rapaciously — as it does. All the belligerent buffoons and maniacs who would do well in a civil war also do well in democratic politics. If you lose an election, you'd probably also have lost the war, and you are thus persuaded to desist from such a war. Peace — peace with plunder at any rate — reigns. Peace does not guarantee liberty, but it gives it a chance.

You might argue that, since libertarianism is so different from democracy, libertarians with their wits about them will resist it, or, if they accept it, will be on their guard against its more ghastly consequences. But democracy breaks out for real reasons, and from then on it has an evil logic of its own. Antoine Clarke will have no difficulty controlling his party so long as it remains small, but what if he gets fed up, or if his somewhat lackadaisical approach to life and alleged lack of TV charisma (or whatever), causes the ILP to want a successor? How will that person be chosen? Will Antoine simply nominate him? Only if the ILP has got absolutely nowhere will there be no quarrelling about such things. Sooner or later, democracy will assert itself, and then all the horrors that Antoine now wants to keep at bay will explode.

There's another reason why libertarian politicians will get sucked towards democracy as the way to run their party, which is that in the very process of standing for election they will be endorsing democracy as a working method, and if they don't run their party democratically, that means they're being inconsistent. All party political heavyweights live with this problem, of course. All need to persuade their members that they have power, while at the same time making sure that this "power" is only used in approved ways, in other words that the power isn't power. And they all lie about this contradiction so relentlessly that we scarcely notice, and are shocked only when they lapse into truth. (In practice, wise party bosses decide the big stuff themselves, and devise a mass of trivial arguments concerning which the mere verdict doesn't really matter, for the membership to gratify its democratic urges. Where to have the next conference, what colour cups to use, and so on.)

But the problem goes beyond the mere appearance of consistency. Appearances can take on a life of their own; window dressing can take over the shop. Given that a verbal treacle of democratic propriety is likely to be poured over the intelligently despotic workings of the ILP, just as it is over the other political parties, "libertarians" are liable to join the ILP who genuinely believe in democracy as an everyday working method. When they learn that

in fact the ILP is run by those who run it, rather than by random assemblages of mere members, they may gang together and turn the ILP into a genuinely democratic organisation, in which case misery and chaos of all kinds are guaranteed.

In the Libertarian Alliance all faction-fighting, majority-voting nonsense is impossible because Chris Tame can outvote all possible combinations of his opponents one-nil, and everyone knows it. Accordingly potential opponents don't bother to assemble themselves in the first place, and peace reigns.

SAD LOSERS

While I was writing this piece, I got Chris Tame to talk me through, yet again, his reasons for opposing a libertarian political party. In addition to the points made above, he also emphasised the pointlessness not just of political parties generally, but in particular of *small* political parties. Antoine says he wants to spread libertarian ideas, but the danger is that the only idea he'll really succeed in spreading is what sad losers he and his followers are. If you are a small party, the media people don't even read your election propaganda, let alone quote from it in their reports. All manner of barriers both financial and legal have been erected to shut you out of serious politics. The effort spent climbing over these barriers could yield far greater gains for the libertarian movement as a whole if applied to other projects.

Chris mentioned the example of the environmental campaigning group Greenpeace, as well as publishing enterprises like the LA and the Cato Institute. The contrast between the success of Greenpeace and the maelstrom of personal nastiness that was — and may still be for all I know — the Green Party, is extreme. The Green Party may have done a tiny bit to spread greenery. But the grief involved was stupendous.

THE SINKING SHIP OF POLITICS

How you believe in prosecuting the libertarian struggle depends on how you think the dominion of "politics" will ever be ended.

I sense that this end may already be becoming visible. A generation ago, politicians — all politicians — were still full of bounce and confidence. They believed that the future belonged to them, and therefore that their quarrels with one another were of immense importance. But now the more manic political enthusiasts like Nazis and Communists are utterly discredited, and our own democratically elected politicians can't take any more money from us than they already do. So, as far as politics is concerned, this is it! All politically inspired "improvements" now (a) do no good, and (b) have to be paid for with cuts in other parts of the politically administered budget, cuts which cast a pall of gloom over the entire class of political enthusiasts.

It is now the techno-entrepreneurs and "private sector politicians", of computers, space rockets, genetic engineering, internet business, private sector policing and community building, and so on, who are making and shaping the future, not the politicians, and the wiser politicians can already sense this.

The fundamental problem, therefore, with "libertarian party politics" is that a libertarian party politician is a rat signing on to a slowly sinking ship. By the time you get your hands anywhere near the steering wheel, the ship of party-politics-as-a-whole may itself be dead in the water. You won't *ever* get to look as sensible as the regular party politicians still manage to look now, but give it time and they'll all end up looking as pathetic as you do now!

Meanwhile, such subterranean political shifts as these are expressed within the political system more in the form of massive abstentions than in the form of a handful of "libertarian" votes. Politics as we now know it won't be dethroned by voting for "anti-political politicians", any more than the Reformation was unleashed by persuading cardinals to vote for a Protestant Pope.

If the politicians can have their morale sapped sufficiently — their will-to-power sufficiently knocked out them — then the "libertarian revolution" will simply be them giving up. Their laws will cease to be enforced. Their taxes will cease to be ga-

thered. Life will pass them by, and they'll just walk away from their silly offices and agencies and constituency "surgeries", and get themselves real lives.

Of course "politics" won't be dead for ever. The price of freedom will of course be *eternal* vigilance, not a mere one-off victory for the voluntary principle. But this particular historical epoch, of 50% tribute to the State and 250% regulation of anything and everything by the State, will sink into the history books. Those few little sub-engines in the vast state machine that make real sense will be kept going on a voluntary basis, much as the saner relics of feudalism persisted long after the feudal system as such was dead and buried. The rest will rust into nothing.

Far-fetched? Perhaps. But it is surely even more far-fetched to suppose that the mountains of laws and regulations now being churned out by the "advanced" State machines will all be solemnly flattened by the same ponderous parliamentary mechanisms that created them.

My final bitch about party politics is that it is so incurably local. The new world of post-politics will be global. We now have machines we can talk to the whole world with. Yet the ILP will only be seeking support from a mere sixty million people.

A CONVERSION COURSE IN THE FUTLITY OF PARTY POLITICS

If I'm so hostile to libertarian party politics, what was I doing at that meeting? One answer is that the ILP, unlike the British Libertarian Party of Chris Tame's and my nightmares, is at least being started by someone who has taken part in the tactical arguments about libertarian party politics that have gone on in the British libertarian movement over the years, and who realises that not all libertarians agree with him about what a fine thing the ILP is. The ILP and its members may pay some attention to doubts like mine. They may then see the early stages of the horrors I describe, and be able to walk away from them before they seriously hurt themselves.

I feel about the horrors of libertarian party politics rather as I feel about the horrors of war. When nobody fears war and assumes its horrors to be a thing of the past, look out. War is imminent.³ On the other hand, if everyone is dreading war, the chances are good that for this very reason peace may reign. If the ILP is run by people who understand the kind of pressures and temptations and horrors I've been describing, then a relatively sane, friendly and even pleasurable ILP may yet develop. But if it ever gets cocky and starts assuming that horrors such as I've described "can't happen to us", then all hell will probably break loose, and frankly, that seems to me only a matter of time.

More fundamentally, the problem with saying that the people who are now joining the ILP ought instead to do something else for the libertarian cause is that people don't have a fixed quantity of enthusiasm for all sorts of different libertarian enterprises. Enthusiasts for libertarian party politics are enthusiasts especially for *politics*. They tend to be ex-members of other political parties. At the very least they take it for granted that politics is, so to speak, where it's at. I think they're wrong. But persuading them to abandon the political paradigm means persuading them to look at the world in a fundamentally different way. Merely trading titbits about how "the same money you're spending registering as an Independent Libertarian Party candidate would pay for a hundred Libertarian Alliance pamphlets" won't achieve anything with these people. For them, the "triumph of libertarianism" can *only* mean "millions of people voting libertarian". So, for them, sooner or later, the party political battle simply *has* to be joined, regardless of the cost either in happiness or in resources. Comparing libertarian party politics to war again, I appear to them in the way that a pacifist does to a soldier. War is hell, says I, the pacifist, so don't do it. Of course war is hell, replies the soldier, but some wars just have to be fought.

No they don't. They truly don't. The most useful job that a British libertarian political party may do is to be a conversion course,

in the futility of party politics. People will join the thing, realise that it is an intermittently vicious but otherwise boring and pointless social backwater — part of a larger social backwater consisting of party politics as a whole — and leave. Suitably rested, they may then become effective libertarians.

The danger, as Chris Tame never tires of pointing out, is that they *won't* ever again be effective libertarians, having been put off "libertarianism" for life — "burnt out", as he puts it.⁴

Antoine Clarke certainly risks burn-out. In addition to starting the ILP, he is also running *TAANSTAF* *Times*, and as if keeping that coming out regularly wasn't enough he's already launched (in the sense that he has promised us that it will happen Real Soon Now) the *Norlonto Review*. What will he do in his afternoons and evenings, I wonder?

Meanwhile, we in the Libertarian Alliance can't stop "libertarian party politics" — we can only criticise it and mock it, and remind all involved that they aren't helping the cause of libertarianism nearly as much as they may think they are.

My personal nightmare is that, me being the one who supplies the Libertarian Alliance with its contact address by living at it, and who answers the Libertarian Alliance's phone, I may some day soon have to spend great gobs of my time fielding enquiries not about the LA but about the ILP. I truly don't now know what I'll say in such circumstances. It may not — see all of the above — be nice.

Ah, the hell with it! A Libertarian Alliance subscriber recently gave me a copy of a computer programme called Adobe Acrobat, which will apparently — eventually (Real Soon Now) — enable a person anywhere on the planet with a computer, an internet connection and a half decent printer to print out these LA pieces not just as a huge pile of brand-X verbiage, but as I print them, with LA logos and the pictorial decoration and the boxes with ISBN numbers and whatnot. They will, in short, be able to print out LA artwork, and can then photocopy our stuff at will, just like us. (They could even mass-print it in the William Caxton manner if they feel like it. We don't do this but that needn't stop others.) Thus the Libertarian Alliance will help to establish libertarian strongholds at the Universities of Lima, Johannesburg, Delhi, South Grunge (England), and a hundred other places besides, without any of us ever having to go there or even to know the email numbers, phone numbers, fax numbers or addresses of anybody who lives there. Now that *is* a big step, in *exactly* the right direction.

NOTES

1. In *The Independent Libertarian Party: An Idea Whose Time Has Come (Being Among Other Things a Reply to Nigel Meek)*, Tactical Notes No. 25, Libertarian Alliance, London, 1999. What Antoine Clarke was (among other things) replying to was Meek's *The Libertarian Party of Great Britain, An Idea Whose Time Has NOT Come*, Tactical Notes No. 22, Libertarian Alliance, London, 1998. Meek's opposition to such a party is based on arguing that public opinion would not now support such a party in any but derisory numbers, which I take to be so obvious as not to need proving. And even if millions did like such a Party's ideas, that doesn't mean that even those millions would necessarily vote for it.
2. Many years ago, the Libertarian Alliance *did* flirt with democracy. It allowed itself to be ruled by a committee whose members each had one vote. The resulting battles were so frightful that we still only speak of the episode in hushed and evasive generalities. But it was a sort of a blessing, because the most important lesson about democracy *was* learned: Don't!
3. Was it only coincidence that *Prospect* (a very intelligent journal which I buy every month) had, on its April 1999 cover the words "THE END OF WAR"? Nothing in the piece thus advertised was contradicted by the immediate outbreak of war in the Balkans, but *Prospect* made itself look very foolish, as its editor ruefully admitted in June.
4. For a vivid analysis of how good causes can destroy you, see Harry Browne's classic *How I Found Freedom In An Unfree World*, Macmillan, New York, 1973. I'm told that this has recently been revised and re-issued. Presumably the new version of *HIFFIAUW* contains an explanation of why Browne recently ran as the American Libertarian Party's candidate for President of the United States, a type of behaviour he swore in the original version of the book to resist for ever.