

DOES BRITAIN NEED A LIBERTARIAN PARTY?

Neil Lock



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What Does the Question Mean?

In honour of the late Chris Tame, the Libertarian Alliance has instituted a yearly essay contest. This year we were invited to answer a simple sounding question: Does Britain need a libertarian party? I feel privileged to have this opportunity to regale you with my, some will say singular, answers.

Now, the question posed is not as simple as it looks. We all know, for instance, what the word libertarian means. Yet, if I asked all of you to write your definitions down, I expect you would give at least a dozen different answers. So I will say what I understand by the word libertarian, as it appears in this question: “Dedicated to the maximum possible individual freedom in a civilized society”.

The word party also has several meanings. When we meet at our conferences, the gathering, indeed, is a libertarian party—and I hope everyone agrees that it’s a Jolly Good Thing.

But the context, in which the question was asked, suggests that what is meant is a *political* party, with an intention eventually to win government power. And complete with manifesto, party hierarchy, membership, candidates for office, soundbites and, presumably, scandals. And that is the definition I use for my answer.

The most difficult word in the question, however, is Britain. I confess that I consider Britain something of a dirty word, and one reason is that it is poorly defined.

I have two dictionaries on CD, an Oxford Compendium and a Webster’s. Neither even has an entry for the word Britain. My 1928 Pocket Oxford does define the word, but says “(loosely), the British Empire”. None of them is any help.

So I must fall back on the senses in which the

word Britain is commonly used. The first—and the only one I myself accept—is “a group of islands in the western North Sea”. If we take this meaning, then the question becomes trivial. Islands may need, for example, rain. But whoever heard of a piece of land needing a political party?

The second meaning of Britain—and, I think, a dishonest one—is as a shorthand for the state. Specifically, the state that rules tyrannically over people in the islands called Britain and six north-eastern counties of the island called Ireland. When politicians waffle about what is best for Britain, what they really mean is what is best for this British state.

Now, I am no lover of the state. My own characterization of the state is: “An organization, founded on violence, theft, deceit and mental manipulation, and serving the interests of a political ruling class and their hangers-on”.

So, if the question is interpreted as, “Does the British state need a libertarian party?”, it has again an obvious answer: No. For today’s British statisticians are very good at what they do. Making war. Destroying civil liberties. Stealing, re-distributing and wasting our earned wealth. Keeping up a constant barrage of lies, spin and scares. Ever seeking to increase their control over every aspect of our lives, and to do it ever more harshly and intrusively. Forcing on us flawed and fraudulent environmentalist policies. Stalking us with cameras everywhere, trying to catch us out in the tiniest breach of political correctness.

No, such a state cannot possibly have any need of those pesky libertarians, with their silly ideals like non-aggression, individual freedom, property and privacy rights and free markets!

A third meaning of Britain, and the one I think the setter of the question may have meant, is a community, formed of everyone living in the islands called Britain. (Not forgetting, of course,

those living in six north-eastern counties of the island called Ireland). But I cannot accept this meaning; for I myself feel no sense of national identity, or attachment to any such community. Indeed, any community, of which I could feel a part, would blackball most, if not all, of today's politicians, and many of their toadies.

To sum up my feelings about today's statist political classes, I misquote a pope from many centuries ago: They are not British, but brutish.

The Question Re-Formulated and the Answer

So, to make progress, I must re-phrase the question so it makes sense to me. Here it is—and it's quite a mouthful. "Should we, the lovers of freedom among those subjected to the rule of the violent, thieving, dishonest state called Britain, devote efforts towards forming a political party (complete with manifesto, party hierarchy and the trappings) dedicated to the maximum possible individual freedom in a civilized society?"

Now, at last, I can give you my answer to the question. And it's... wait for it... No!

The Reasons

Being something of a contrarian, I choose to work up from the least important of my five reasons towards the most important.

First, practical reasons. Party politics is expensive, and we haven't got the money. And it's time consuming too, and most of us haven't got the time—nor many of us the necessary skills.

Second, agreeing our manifesto would be an immensely difficult task. Many policies favoured by one lot of us would alienate another lot of us. We would have, not only disputes between purists and pragmatists, but also disputes between pragmatists of different stripes. For example, there would be those who want to maintain some form of public welfare system, and favour draconian immigration restrictions, and those who want to ditch the welfare state entirely, and can therefore afford to be relaxed about immigration.

Third, the only example in recent times of a new

party gaining power in the islands called Britain was the Labour party—and it took them 31 years, from 1893 to 1924. I don't know about the rest of you, but I don't want to wait three decades or more for freedom.

Fourth, a libertarian party won't work anyway. I give you the sad story of the one libertarian party which, to my knowledge, has tasted real success—the Movimiento Libertario in Costa Rica. For many years, they did a great job. They got voter support up to almost ten per cent. They won 6 seats in a 57-seat parliament. They even had a credible presidential candidate. Then, in 2005, the party was taken over by so-called moderates. The libertarians, who had worked so hard for the cause, were branded as radicals and purged from the party. And the party now presents itself as a liberal party. All of which leads to a harsh conclusion. If a libertarian party fails, it fails. And if it succeeds, it fails because it gets taken over and isn't libertarian any more.

Fifth, and most important, politics is old hat.

It is fashionable today, on the far left at least, to say that the state is out of date. That, in an age of technology and nuclear weapons, the state or superstate, with its rulers and ruled, its wars, its redistributory and confiscatory taxes and its bad laws, is no longer an appropriate way for we human beings to organize ourselves. That new forms of society are needed.

I suggest to you that these thinkers, uncomfortable though some of you may be with their ideas, are dead right. Indeed, I go further. I think the state and its political system are already collapsing around us. And what we are living through now is a phase in the collapse, where the statists are desperately striving to shore up their blessed state. That, I believe, is why they are falling over each other in their efforts to do as many bad things to us as they possibly can.

But there is today, both in the islands called Britain and elsewhere, a rising tide of contempt for politics and politicians. The political classes have spent most of the last two centuries trying to persuade us that they and their state are good for us. But people—and not just those already aware of

the ideas of liberty—have begun to see this for what it is, a lie. More and more people are waking up from the anaesthetic, and starting to feel the pain. I sense there's the potential for a big backlash building up out there.

So, I think, to try to form a libertarian political party today would be a step in exactly the wrong direction. Not only would we be trying to play the stats at their own political game. But we would also be tying ourselves to a system that is doomed to fail.

Alternatives

So, if a libertarian party will not cure our ills, what should we be doing instead?

I think there are four main things we can usefully do. First, those who have particular interests or skills in specific issues can form organizations dedicated to changing the mental climate on those issues. A good example of such an organization, which has been remarkably successful in its just two years of existence, is the TaxPayers' Alliance.

Second, all of us must continue to defend and to promote the ideas of liberty. And we have a damn good product, don't we? For what we have to sell is not some untried anarchist Utopia, but a value system which is the product of the best of human history. These values, which I loosely term Western values, come to us from ancient Greece, through Rome and the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution and up into modern times.

To carry out their deceptions, the stats have had to tarnish these Western values, and corrupt people's view of them. The rule of law, democracy, property rights, government for the benefit of the governed, freedom of speech, business and the free market, privacy, non-aggression and many more—all have taken a pasting from our enemies. The most important thing for us to do today, I believe, is to bring these values out of their temporary obscurity, to air them and to give them a bit of a polish.

Third, we must take what opportunities we can to show up the political classes for what they are.

Their callousness, their dishonesty and hypocrisy, their arrogance, their evasion of responsibility for their actions, their pollution of the mental climate, are all becoming increasingly obvious to those who can see. If we can help to remove people's blinkers, so that they can see too, we will be doing great service to the cause of freedom.

Fourth, those of you, who really do have your sights set on elected office, need not despair. For, as the state collapses, government—real government, I mean, government for the benefit of each civilized individual among the governed—will become more and more important. There will come a time, I think, when it is appropriate for freedom-lovers with the necessary skills to stand for public office. (*Public* office, note, not *political* office).

As I said earlier, new forms of society will be needed to replace the state. And new forms of association will be needed to replace the political party. I give you an off-the-wall suggestion for one such.

Imagine a group of candidates for office, each standing as an Independent and using their own judgement, but all agreeing on a statement of fundamental principles. That statement might cover, at least: The purposes of government. The (very limited) functions which government may perform. The rights which government must respect, and the limitations to which it must keep. Moral standards the candidates will keep to, and values they will promote. And how government should be paid for by its subscribers.

Conclusion

To sum up. A libertarian political party, in my view, is not the way forward for us lovers of freedom. For the state and its politics today are failing. To get ourselves deeply involved in politics would be exactly the wrong thing to do. Instead, we should continue to promote the ideas and values of individual liberty. We should aim to change the mental climate in favour of liberty. And, when we can, we should give the failing political system a helping hand in its self-destruction.