

DOES BRITAIN NEED A LIBERTARIAN PARTY?

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INTRODUCTION

Libertarianism is in retreat. Or perhaps—given that libertarianism has never been anywhere remotely close to being in the ascendancy in recent decades—it is fairer to say that libertarianism has made no significant advance from its contemporary position in the political bunker. The three major political parties have coalesced around an irritatingly vague—but deeply pernicious—brand of social democracy, ancient liberties have been incinerated in the name of the war on terror, government expenditure and waste continue unchecked and the state’s intrusion into trivial aspects of people’s lives—such as whether they smoke cigarettes in their local pub—has reached maniacal proportions.

All of this has happened with barely a murmur of public resistance, and often with the civilian population’s enthusiastic support.

I suppose the prospects for libertarianism could be worse—indeed they seem to keep getting worse with each passing year—but it would require a truly heroic level of optimism to believe that this long dark night is about to be broken by a bright new dawn. An even stronger dose of the happy pills would be needed to believe that a Libertarian Party would be likely to meet with any major electoral success in the short term.

But despite this bleak outlook, there are three very good reasons for libertarians to seriously consider forming their own political party and start electioneering forthwith. The two serious arguments against such a move merit analysis, but can be rebutted. Finally, there is an important question over timing. Our country may need us, but that does not mean we are obliged to answer that calling. At least not yet.

THREE GOOD REASONS FOR FORMING A LIBERTARIAN PARTY

Libertarian Alliance strategy has not met with success

Despite the noble and often brilliant efforts of the Libertarian Alliance’s leading lights, the strategy of seeking to influence intellectuals and opinion formers¹ has not brought the libertarian movement anywhere close to the levers of power. None of the three major political parties have embraced libertarianism since the LA’s formation in 1979, and a good case can be made that the

Conservative Party has moved further away from it. The number of libertarian Members of Parliament can be counted on the fingers of one hand—and probably on the fingers of one thumb.²

Of course, supporters of the existing strategy can raise a number of objections to this analysis. They may claim that although the strategy has not propelled libertarians into high office, it was still the optimal course of action to follow. They can point to the enormous amount of media coverage—surely tens of millions of pounds worth in advertising equivalent terms—secured by LA spokespeople on a shoestring budget. They could say—as Mao Tse-Tung did of the French revolution—that it’s still “too early to tell”. Nevertheless, the brutal truth is that if the last three decades of effort constitute relative success, it doesn’t bear thinking about what failure might look like.

In such circumstances, alternative political strategies—including the formation of an electoral vehicle for libertarianism—merit serious consideration. The *prima facie* case for a Libertarian Party is that engaging in and winning the argument is simply not enough and that libertarianism—or even concessions in a libertarian direction—requires an identifiable and measurable electoral force.

Political radicalism is “in” and there is no other libertarian option on the ballot paper

A detailed analysis of the breadth and depth of libertarian support amongst the wider electorate is beyond the remit of such a short essay.³ It could be relatively large—or fairly tiny. It could be growing, diminishing or remaining static. But we can say with confidence that whatever the size of the libertarian vote, it is homeless.⁴ Of course, it is no one’s duty to provide libertarian voters with a box they can cross, in good conscience, on a ballot paper. A hard-headed—and potentially expensive—assessment would need to be made by the putative founders of the Libertarian Party about whether there were enough potential crosses to be collected to make the considerable time and effort of marshalling them in one box worthwhile.

I’m neither a pollster nor a statistician, but I believe there are reasons to be cheerful. Minority parties⁵ representing a plethora of different ideologies and causes have experienced sustained and significant growth in recent years. This appears to be a long-term trend—

perhaps fuelled by an increasing disillusionment with “mainstream” politics in general. Nearly half a century ago, in the 1959 General Election, 1% of the electorate⁶ voted for minor parties. In the 2005 General Election, this had risen to 10.3%, the highest proportion in modern times.⁷ In 1959, the share of the vote for the Conservative and Labour parties was 93.2%. In 2005, it was just 67.6%.

In other major elections, the rise of minority parties has been even more dramatic and—because of the increasing use of proportional representation—more profitable in terms of winning seats. In the 1994 UK elections for the European Parliament, 11% voted for minority parties. In 1999—the first such elections held under a proportional voting system—this had risen to 23.5%. In the last European elections in 2004, the proportion had increased further still to 34.8%. An interesting aside is that those elections also saw the two largest parties score less than 50% of the nationwide vote between them,⁸ the first time this has happened since the advent of universal suffrage.

The elections for the Greater London Assembly tell a similar story. In 2004, both the Respect Party and the British National Party came within a whisker of securing elected representation.⁹ In the 2000 elections, the obscure Christian Peoples Alliance polled 3.3% of the vote—falling just 1.7% short of securing an assembly seat. According to their latest submission to the Electoral Commission, the Christian People’s Alliance is hardly a mass movement—it has less than 400 members.¹⁰

Of course, this sort of number crunching doesn’t conclusively prove that a newly founded Libertarian Party would have a good chance of electoral success. Perhaps the various ideologies and interests represented by these relatively successful minor parties have a firmer, more committed base of support than libertarians could presently hope for.

It is also fair to say that even if a Libertarian Party did secure, for sake of argument, a seat in the European Parliament and the Greater London Assembly in 2009, this would not constitute a quantum leap towards control of either the executive or the legislature. Nevertheless, the gains in political credibility, and media impact, could be considerable. The arena of British electoral politics is clearly one in which small, poorly funded groups of determined and motivated individuals are starting to meet with modest forms of success. The mounting evidence is that libertarian absenteeism from this arena shouldn’t be taken lightly.

The electoral cycle can inspire libertarians to become advocates

Brian Micklethwait is one of my favourite libertarian writers. His writing usually makes me smile and always makes me think. I am rarely entertained or educated in the same way, or to the same extent, by any other political commentator. I don’t know Brian at all well—I have met him perhaps half a dozen times—so I’m particularly loath to criticise him personally. But, duty demands it Brian is one of those highly effective libertarians who seem to produce a highly engaging product, but laments—or perhaps even celebrates—his lack of self-discipline. He readily concedes that LA mailings he oversaw often went out late and/or haphazardly, and on his blog¹¹ he casually refers to how he hasn’t got round to writing very much recently.

I think Brian proves my counter-intuitive assertion that libertarians need more collective discipline in order to increase our political influence. In his touching—almost pained—defenestration of the Independent Libertarian Party in 1999,¹² Brian rails against the perpetual, externally-enforced, tedious administrative deadlines which require those seeking to garner electoral votes to act in certain (slightly odd) ways at certain (largely arbitrary) times.

But, I may well have been a more effective libertarian crusader over the past ten years if—rather than being kindly asked to commit to paper some of my ill-considered thoughts about Rawls’ veil of ignorance¹³ at a time of my choosing—I’d been encouraged to assist in a Libertarian electoral effort that was strictly time-limited. I can’t write as well as Brian Micklethwait. I’m not nearly as witty. But I’m pretty good at persuading ordinary folk in the pub or on the doorstep that libertarianism is a pretty good thing and that they should back it. I’m just guessing that there are a lot of libertarians like me. Why haven’t I set up the Libertarian Party myself? Well, I think I can confidently say that my own lack of self-discipline dwarves even Brian’s.

The truth is that the electoral cycle—with its clear deadlines and potential dramas—could act as a real incentive for those who don’t have the skills, knowledge, self-discipline or dedication of the LA’s leading lights. We might well see more libertarians talking face-to-face to more “undecided” people than seems imaginable at present. This is only a potential prize, but is a valuable one.

THE TWO PROBLEMS WITH A BRITISH LIBERTARIAN PARTY

The essential case against a libertarian electoral vehicle is that (a) the skills and talents of libertarian activists will become internally focused on trivial matters such as the

need to raise substantial funds to meet the administrative criteria for participating in the electoral process and (b) contentious, obscure, ideological conflicts which have been satisfactorily—even productively—contained within the LA, would rip apart a formal political party

Neither of these are real barriers to the formation of a Libertarian Party. Firstly, the idea that time and effort spent on tactical questions about how best to communicate the libertarian message to the wider public is necessarily less productive than an open-ended discussion between libertarian objectivists and libertarian utilitarians is misguided to the point of self-indulgence. The question (asked here) is not which activity is more intellectually fulfilling or better fun—but which is more productive. Shoving leaflets through doors, trying to explain your case on the doorstep, filing papers with the Electoral Commission to get a Libertarian onto the ballot paper—these are tedious and often tiresome pursuits. But they may well be what are needed to more successfully prosecute the Libertarian case.

Amongst those libertarians interested in acquiring political power before this century is out, ideological differences will—at some point—have to be resolved, or put aside. There is little reason to believe that continual discussion of our philosophical distinctions will create unity on these matters. One person might change his mind at one seminar. Another may hone their ideas at another conference. Such gatherings perform a genuinely valuable and fulfilling function. But they are not barriers to the formation of a political party. Libertarianism contains many strands—but for electoral and organisational purposes, we are considerably less divided than the bile and hatred that exists amongst our opponents.

We may be needed, but we might not be ready

For all the reasons stated above, I believe the case for creating—and supporting—a new Libertarian Party is strong. But it is not overwhelming. The British Libertarian movement could suffer real damage if there was a serious split along tactical lines.¹⁴ Those who favour the formation of a new party need not rush. There are—thankfully—no formal voting mechanisms to press for such a strategy, but therefore also no way to measure exactly “when to go for it”. I suspect that the Brian Micklethwaits might change their mind in the next few years. Britain does need a Libertarian Party. But we should take our time in forming it.

NOTES

(1) Libertarian Alliance Executive Committee, *Purpose and Strategy of the Libertarian Alliance*, Tactical Notes No. 1, London, Libertarian Alliance, 1981.

(2) Numerous Conservative MPs are described in as be-

ing “closet” libertarians. Richard Shepherd MP seems to be the closest to being a publicly declared libertarian.

(3) Nigel Meek (*The Libertarian Party of Great Britain: An Idea Whose Time Has NOT Come*, Tactical Notes No. 22, London, Libertarian Alliance, 1998) and Antoine Clarke (*The Independent Libertarian Party: An Idea Whose Time Has Come (Being Among Other Things, A Reply to Nigel Meek)*, Tactical Notes No. 25, London, Libertarian Alliance 1999) explored—and disagreed about—these issues in depth. Clarke relies on IEA research suggesting that 19% of the population might be classified as libertarian.

(4) The United Kingdom Independence Party appears to have pretensions to claiming the libertarian mantle, but at its last conference, it debated the imposition of tariffs and the re-introduction of national service, <http://www.ukip.org/ukip/images/stories/pdf/conference%20programme.pdf>.

(5) I use the term “minority party” or “minor party” to mean a political party other than Conservative, Labour or Liberal Democrat (or the Lib Dems’ predecessor parties). A fair case can probably be made that the Liberal Democrats are—or have been in the past—a minority party. But I use the term consistently to mean political parties other than these three.

(6) I use this term loosely—all stated percentages are of votes cast, not of all those eligible to vote.

(7) It is difficult to make comparisons with post-war elections prior to 1959, as the National Liberal vote is listed separately but should probably be considered a subset of the Conservative vote.

(8) The Conservatives scored 26.7% and Labour 22.6%.

(9) Respect polled 4.57% on the party list vote and the BNP 4.71%—the “threshold” is 5%.

(10) CPA Statement of Accounts, 31st Dec 2006, http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/files/dms/ChristianPeoplesAlliance_25539-18978_EN_SW_.PDF.

(11) The excellent <http://www.brianmicklethwait.com>.

(12) Brian Micklethwait, *What Is Wrong With a Libertarian Political Party*, Tactical Notes No. 26, London, Libertarian Alliance, 1998.

(13) John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1972. It’s still as ridiculous now as when I first read it.

(14) The split in the LA in 1982 is still only discussed in hushed tones, if at all.