

■ Liberal Democrats and freedom

Jeremy Browne MP

Introduction

In my response, I will seek to explain why liberalism is the greatest guarantor of genuine freedom and the political creed most applicable to our times.

Before that, however, I wish to deal briefly with the ideological concept that sits at the heart of Neal Lawson's essay: 'liberal socialism'.

There is no such thing as 'liberal socialism'. There is liberalism and there is socialism.

Liberalism is concerned with empowerment: the citizen is the champion. Socialism is prescriptive: the government knows best. Liberalism is about personal choice; socialism is coercive. Liberalism has devolutionary instincts; socialism is centralising. Liberalism is about individuality; socialism enforces conformity. Whereas liberalism cherishes diversity, socialism seeks to impose a grinding uniformity on its subjects.

Neal Lawson's essay seeks to remove a genuine choice between two very different political ideologies. Even the keenest advocate of Clinton-style triangulation should balk at his invented construct.

Neal Lawson is a socialist keen to be described as a 'liberal socialist'; David Cameron is a conservative anxious to brand himself as a 'liberal conservative'. What neither appreciates is that liberalism is not a spray-on adjective which can instantly

revitalise faltering political ideas and parties. Liberalism cannot be available à la carte – it is a coherent package which, taken as a whole, is in tune with human nature and the political challenges of today.

In his contribution to 'The Orange Book', a collection of liberal essays, David Laws identified four strands of contemporary liberalism: personal, economic, social and political. True liberalism contains all of these facets and they provide a suitable framework for any discussion about freedom.

Personal freedom

Authoritarianism is the antithesis of freedom and the greatest threat to liberalism.

The shift towards more authoritarian government in Britain should not be overstated but that does not mean it should be ignored either. There has been a continuous flow of legislation that has increased the power of the state at the expense of the individual citizen.

Since the last general election the pace has quickened. People can now be imprisoned without charge for 28 days when the previous limit was half that time. Every British citizen wishing to travel abroad will soon be required to permanently register their identity on the state database. Smoking is to be banned in privately owned businesses, even when everyone present wishes to smoke. Only the intervention of the unelected House of Lords prevented the government from deciding which jokes would unreasonably offend religious sensibilities.

As with every restriction of individual freedom, a case can be made for the change. But the burden of proof now, too often, rests with those who wish to maintain personal freedom, rather than as an impediment to those who seek to restrict liberty.

This shift is most striking in the Labour party. For most socialists the acceptance of capitalism – free trade, competition, privatisation, lower taxation, low inflation and a limited role for the trade unions – has reduced the prospect of achieving a perfect society by economic means. One consequence has been the pursuit of a more perfect society using another approach – banning undesirable behaviour. If, so the thinking goes, we can

proscribe every activity of which we disapprove, regardless even of whether it impinges improperly on the lives of others, and then legislate to ban it, what will remain will be a close approximation of the perfect society.

Our legislators decide whether they personally approve of the activity being proscribed and, assuming they do not, vote for the ban. But they are asking themselves the wrong question. There are plenty of activities which many reasonable people disapprove of – watching mindless television, consuming too many burgers – but that is not a reason to ban them. The question ought instead to be whether there is great and unambiguous harm being done by any given activity, and only then should a ban be considered.

The remorseless erosion of personal freedom must be resisted clearly and consistently by liberals, especially as the Conservatives are unreliable guardians of freedom. They are a coalition between authoritarians and libertarians: the former seeking social order through the extension of state power, the latter often hostile to even a modest role for government.

Liberalism is the greatest protector of personal freedom, but it should be applied with rigour and vigour, and liberals should be those making the strongest case for the burden of proof hurdle to be set at the highest level.

Economic freedom

For someone of my age, born in 1970, it is remarkable to consider that there was ever a serious debate about the relative strength of socialism and capitalism.

The British political settlement of the 1970s is almost surreal. Was there ever a more absurd position than the Secretary of State for Prices? What were the trade unions doing setting government economic policy in Downing Street? Why did the state own an airline? Did people really shop with a candle stuck on to their supermarket trolley?

The economic failure of socialism has been so emphatic that the ideology has become almost totally discredited. So the test now is to apply liberal economic principles to the new challenges: the growth in service industries; globalisation; more skills-based

employment; keener competition and greater consumer responsiveness.

Neal Lawson laments the vulgarity of consumerism, and there is admittedly something unsettling about a scrum of bargain-seekers pushing each other aside at the new year's sales (although I would rather they were competing for luxuries in a capitalist economy than muscling themselves to the front of a bread-queue in an inefficient socialist one).

But Neal Lawson makes a mistake in believing that the motivation of the shoppers is the business of the state. The point is they are exercising their freedom of choice. Neal Lawson may not wish to buy his food from a supermarket, or visit IKEA on a Sunday afternoon, and no-one is forcing him to do so.

His personal decisions, and the overall workings of the economy, do not need to be micro-managed by the state. Consumer preferences continually change and the market evolves to meet them. This restless change is precisely what makes liberal free markets efficient and able to adapt.

Neal Lawson claims capitalism means “freedom for the few, not the many”. But the evidence suggests otherwise. Many more people in Britain now enjoy the economic freedom to own their home, travel abroad or buy the goods they seek. The alternative espoused by Neal Lawson is to create equality by restricting this type of freedom.

Far from consumerism being the new totalitarianism, it is a democratising force. Competition, coupled with informed consumers and without abuses of monopoly power, raises standards and increases choice. And the decisions are in the hands of the people, without the state needing to direct them.

The Conservatives, meanwhile, are torn between those who champion free markets and those who believe free markets threaten the society they seek to conserve. Take extra housing development as an example: the capitalist Conservatives generally support it while the heritage Conservatives regard the protection of the greenbelt as an article of faith.

Market intervention should be designed to enforce competition standards and break-up monopolies and cartels. The task and opportunity for liberals is to maintain a business climate where

there is more consumer responsiveness and greater choice, not less.

Social freedom

No genuine liberal is dispassionate about the need to promote opportunity and social mobility. Economic liberalism is the means to generate wealth and provide greater choice. It is difficult to create a socially progressive society that does not have these attributes. After all, poorer people in wealthy countries are considerably better off than poorer people in poor countries.

But the state should be more ambitious in its objectives than merely acting as a light-touch referee for the operation of a free market. The goal of any progressive government is to foster the ambitions and release the potential of every citizen. The state can and should play an enabling role.

The most obvious manifestation of this function is the provision of education. The freedom of each individual requires them to be able to read, write and add up. But it goes further than that. My liberal ideal is that every person can lead a life which is enriched by art, science and culture. The only rationing of these activities should be the limits of the human imagination.

The challenge for liberals is to make the empowering state truly effective. Often the greatest problem in Britain today is not poverty of income but poverty of ambition. Providing universal free education was a brilliant and enlightened social reform but it is having no benefit for children who consistently truant from school or who choose to be disruptive in the classroom. The creation of public libraries was another huge and imaginative social reform but they are of no benefit to those who choose not to visit them.

So liberals have to be willing to think more creatively about how to achieve greater opportunity and social mobility. Extra money for education is obviously not irrelevant – teachers need to be retained, books bought, school buildings maintained – but nor is it the whole solution. Liberals must avoid confusing the financially benevolent state with the empowering state. The former can assist with the latter but it is not the same.

I want liberals to display a certain ruthlessness in pursuit of social mobility and the opportunity society. It should not just be a vague aspiration; it should be an unrelenting quest. We should never be satisfied by adequate outcomes or resort to excuses for low achievement.

In schools there should be a much stronger emphasis on classroom discipline. No child can maximise their potential if they are in a disrupted lesson where the teacher is seeking to maintain order rather than imparting knowledge. There should be greater rewards for teaching excellence – including more pronounced salary differentials – and less tolerance of lower standards. Schools should have far more flexibility to innovate and much less obligation to conform.

Neal Lawson's socialism is about achieving more social mobility by altering the distribution of income. My liberalism is about achieving greater social mobility by changing the access to opportunity. Our politics today is often accused of lacking passion, but with verve, imagination and the willingness to challenge orthodoxy, the liberal cause of social freedom should be advanced with zeal.

Political freedom

The combined Labour-Conservative vote share reached 97 per cent at the 1951 general election. In 2005, for the first time since the Second World War, the joint support for the two old parties fell below 70 per cent. Labour exercises all the authority of a majority government with the support of little more than a third of the votes cast.

Meanwhile, the House of Lords continues to undermine the notion that Britain is an advanced liberal democracy. No other country appears to regard our upper house as a constitutional model. Indeed, the method for electing our lower house is hardly more popular. When the British government devises systems of parliamentary democracy as part of its nation building efforts it always neglects to recommend our own system.

Why does this matter? It matters because how we are governed is a key determinant of our freedom.

When people hail the virtues of living in a free country they are celebrating the existence of the rule of law and protection from the arbitrary use of power by the state. The concern now felt by many is that the structures and practices of our governance fail to provide a framework which adequately protects their freedom.

The danger comes from an expanding state, insufficiently accountable politicians, remote bureaucracy and the diminishing willingness of people to participate in the democratic processes. Addressing this sickness in our politics, with the goal of having more empowered citizens, is central to the liberal notion of freedom.

The case for reforming the method for selecting members in both houses of parliament is overwhelming. The greatest remaining barrier is self-interest. It is a formidable barrier. History offers few examples of those who exercise undemocratic power voluntarily relinquishing their grip. Yet once change has been made – as with the introduction of more proportional systems in Scotland, Wales, London and European parliament elections – the genie will be hard to stuff back into the bottle.

At other levels where power is exercised, liberals also need to address the failure of political institutions to deliver political freedom.

There is no public enthusiasm for powerful regional government. People do not naturally have a regional frame of reference. Tewkesbury in Gloucestershire is closer to Scotland than it is to Penzance at the other end of the South West region. In the South East no one in Margate would want to look beyond London to Guildford to be governed. There is virtually no appetite for an extra layer of politicians. More government, in more tiers, which is less accountable and with fewer natural links to communities: this should not be a model for liberals.

British local government has also been largely emasculated. When the Conservatives were in government they treated local councils with contempt and systematically reduced their powers. Now we are invited to take seriously their new found enthusiasm for localism. Labour, drawing on the socialist instinct always to centralise, has run a top-down, command-and-control, target-driven government, yet some of their politicians improbably claim to have also discovered the healing power of localism.

While there is a need to strengthen local government, it should not be regarded as the solution to every problem. The liberal goal must be to put authority in the hands of the individual so that we create genuinely empowered citizens. Local councils can facilitate this process but they can also block it. An unresponsive local council is hardly any closer to the liberal ideal than an unresponsive government department.

There is a growing disconnection in Britain between the people and the institutions of politics. Political freedom is a vital strand of liberalism and the means by which this malaise can be best addressed.

Conclusion

Neal Lawson offers a bleak analysis of the human condition. We are not, he claims, “masters of our destiny but donkeys led by consumer carrots”. His prescription is to undermine aspiration and diminish the ability of the individual to live his or her life as he or she sees fit.

Liberalism is, by contrast, an optimistic political theory. It seeks to let a thousand flowers bloom. It wants people to achieve, to prosper, to expand their horizons, to become more reflective, to choose, to be themselves and to dream. Liberalism is the foundation of freedom.