

Does Britain Need A Libertarian Party?

Does Britain need a Libertarian Party? I remember discussing this issue on several occasions with the late Chris Tame, and he was firmly against the idea. Having given it some considerable thought over the past few years I can say that I have come to agree with his view that under no circumstances should Libertarians consider forming a political party in Britain. I will add further that all Libertarian parties in other countries should disband forthwith and spend their money in ways that will effectively further the cause of liberty.

Why? For several reasons, but the main one is that Libertarian ideas are best furthered by a non-party platform on a piecemeal basis, and any attempt to advance Libertarianism as a unified creed will run into all manner of problems which will prevent any such party from ever getting off the ground.

Anyone can form a political party, and many people do, but to form one that has a meaningful chance of winning a general election or simply to win enough seats in Parliament to give it some meaningful influence requires enormous resources both financial and human, and a commitment of such resources over many years if not decades. It is inevitable that the growth of a political party of whatever persuasion, will bring with it internal conflicts, power struggles and often as not major divisions. History bears witness to this, but for confirmation one need look no further than the fairly recent example of the Social Democratic Party which contested its first by-election in July 1981 (and lost). The SDP didn't survive long in its original form, and having morphed into the Liberal Democrats it is now running (in September 2007) at about 16% support in the country as a whole. True, the Party has had some influence, but it remains to be seen if it will ever run the country, and if it does, if the country will be any better for it. So how is Libertarianism different from Social Democracy, Liberal Democracy, or Conservatism for that matter?

As I said, Libertarianism should not, and cannot be advanced as a unified creed; to begin with, it is not one! To take a couple of examples; there are Libertarians who support abortion on demand (pro-choice is the preferred euphemism) while others are opposed to abortion per se. On the subject of the age of consent, there are some Libertarians who believe it should be abolished in its entirety. Chris Tame believed that when a child thought he or she was old enough to engage in sexual activity, take drugs or whatever, the individual concerned should be able to petition a (private) court for the right to do so. There is of course merit in judging everyone as an individual, and clearly some thirteen year olds are more capable than many eighteen year olds, but most people – Libertarians included – will find this sort of proposition ludicrous; an arbitrary age of consent is the only practical way of dealing with young people where sex, alcohol and related matters are concerned.

Then there is the issue of recreational drugs; the strict Libertarian position is that they should all be legalised, regardless of how dangerous they are perceived to be, but clearly some drugs are extremely dangerous, while others are less so. A Libertarian party that ran on a platform of the legalisation of all drugs would lose the support of those who sought to legalise only “soft” drugs; quite likely the party would split into two factions, and we would be back to square one.

There is also a paradox at the heart of a Libertarian party. Libertarianism seeks to destroy state power, so why should we seek to obtain it in the first place?

Another reason we should reject the formation of a Libertarian political party is because of the inevitability of subversion by the state. It is common knowledge that parties of both the extreme left and extreme right are monitored closely by the security services who at times resort to phone tapping and even to recruiting paid agents in their ranks. To give just one fairly recent example, Andy Carmichael who was an organiser for the National Front during the 1990s revealed in 1997 that he had been a paid agent of MI5 for a full five years. The heyday of the National Front was the mid 70s; by the 1990s it was a spent force, yet the *Secret State* still took enough of an interest in it to recruit one of its senior officers.

Although many Libertarians will shrink in horror at being tarred with the same brush as the National Front and at the other end of the scale with the Socialist Workers Party, this is how the powers-that-be view us. Any party, organisation or movement, that calls for the legalisation of hard drugs and the abolition of all censorship cannot be anything but.

The soundest argument for rejecting the formation of a Libertarian party though is the fact that in spite of the horrendous state repressions of recent years which have largely been brought about by the war on drugs and more recently the war on terror, we are making progress. Even senior police officers are now able openly to discuss the legalisation of hard drugs, something that would have been unthinkable ten years ago. Why has this come about? Because it is the dissemination of ideas, not the capture of political power that is important.

Most if not all the great movements for social change in the past two hundred years and more – good and bad - have been brought about not by political parties but by the dissemination of ideas, lately by pressure groups and lobbies, but often by individuals or small groups of individuals, who in most cases have laboured long and hard for years on end with little or no sign of success and often in the face of public ridicule, contempt or just plain apathy until a paradigm shift gives their movement impetus and public support.

The abolitionist movement is one of the earliest such examples, if not the first. The name one immediately associates with the anti-slavery campaign in Britain and worldwide is that of William Wilberforce, not the Conservative Party. The name one associates immediately with the women's suffrage movement is that of Emmeline Pankhurst; who remembers what party was in power when women were given the vote? The name associated with the decriminalisation of homosexuality is that of Wolfenden; most people don't even know his first name (John) much less what government was in power when his report was published in 1957 or who was Prime Minister when its main recommendation was implemented a decade later.

Likewise, Libertarianism has had its successes; although society is now only beginning to talk about the legalisation of hard drugs, Libertarian ideas have already had profound and far reaching effects in the economic field. The mass privatisations which began under Margaret Thatcher would never have come about had it not been for the publication and dissemination of Libertarian literature advocating the deregulation of the economy and the downsizing of the state, in the economic sphere if not in the social one. The Libertarian Alliance and the somewhat older Institute Of Economic Affairs may not have had any official standing with the Thatcher government, indeed most leading Conservatives have probably never heard of the former in any meaningful sense – Neil Hamilton, a minister under John Major being a rare exception – but if I may draw an analogy, by the same token most of today's rock bands have never heard of Chuck Berry in any meaningful sense, but how many of them would exist

without him? In short it is not (possibly short term) political power, nor even recognition that Libertarians must seek, but influence, and that influence has not been wanting.

Chris Tame once complained that peddling Marxism was more profitable than selling Libertarian literature; the Libertarian Bookshop was fairly short-lived, but Marxism is still big business in spite of its unenviable decades long track record of indiscriminate mass murder and economic disasters. Throughout the 80s and 90s the Libertarian Alliance churned out numerous papers and occasional larger publications on subjects as varied as censorship, economics, history, pornography and Prohibition. These publications were often of limited distribution, but they were short, snappy and to the point, and were read by academics, journalists and other persons of influence, including not a few politicians.

Nowadays, distribution is no longer a problem. Like every other pressure group and lobby, Libertarians have been quick to utilise the Internet to preach both to the converted and to the masses. Today, the overwhelming majority of the population spends at least a few hours a week on-line, and Libertarian ideas have slowly but surely spread amongst ordinary people. The latest *fad* if that is the word is for people and organisations to make their own videos for viewing on sites such as YouTube, or their own websites. Videos and web broadcasts do not have to be honed to a high professional standard to attract a large audience, as can be seen from some of the short films and music videos which are regularly downloaded by tens or hundreds of thousands of users.

The advent and rise of the Internet has not only (in effect) abolished censorship, it has also circumvented self-censorship, so that certain taboo subjects which were never discussed or discussed only in certain terms, can now be broadcast to the masses. The democratisation of the Internet together with its cheapness means that we can reach millions at the click of a mouse for virtually no cost at all. What then is the point of raising hundreds of thousands or even millions of pounds to create and maintain a political party in order to make a vain attempt to seize political power when we already have the power to influence public opinion?

Not that the Internet is our only means of communication with the wide world. Over the years leading members of the Libertarian Alliance have regularly appeared on radio and TV programmes where they have expounded their views, often in controversial circumstances. Less than two months after the Dunblane Massacre, Sean Gabb appeared on a Scottish TV programme where he extolled the virtues of gun ownership. Some people might have considered this to be in bad taste, but a decade on he is still appearing on TV and radio shows advancing controversial ideas, which when examined in the cold light of day are neither that controversial nor that shocking.

I mentioned earlier the phenomenon of the paradigm shift. Sometimes these come about quickly and spontaneously, the virtual overnight collapse of Communism and the raising of the Berlin Wall is an extreme example, but it can take decades or even centuries for some paradigms to change. Although slavery was abolished in Britain in 1807 it was over a century before women were enfranchised. Similarly though it may be decades before the madness of Prohibition is seen for what it is, it may be that the anti-drug laws are repealed virtually overnight, but none of us should hold our breath until that happens. No one was or is more aware of this than Chris Tame or his successors; we are in for the long haul, and no one is going to get paid in the meantime.

One final point to note here is that although most officials of the Libertarian Alliance expect to be paid for their media appearances, no one makes money out of promoting the cause of freedom. The LA has no paid officials like the NSPCC or the RSPCA, the Consumers' Association or the Conservative Party. Libertarians promote their cause because they believe it is the right thing to do.

In short, Britain does not need a Libertarian Party, no country needs a Libertarian Party, creating such a party would have no benefit at all except for its salaried officials.