

FREEDOM: THE NEW OBSCENITY

MARK TAHA

I would like to begin by making it clear - as I did in the first essay I wrote for the LA (*Youth Liberation*, Political Notes No. 7) that I'm not an LA member. I describe myself as a Libertarian Conservative Nationalist. You might say that it's the first of those adjective's that's causing me to write what follows.

Tony Benn was right! (I thought that would wake up readers.) Chris Tame was wrong!

I think I'd better explain.

In the late 70s, the Labour Party's problem child expressed the view that we get a "fundamental and irreversible" reform in British politics every 40-odd years, citing the 1832 and 1867 extensions of franchise and the 1906 and 1945 Liberal and Labour welfare reforms - plus nationalisation in the second case - to which their opponents had to adapt or die, as it were. Benn anticipated, of course, that Bennism would be the new consensus - but he got it the wrong way round. Thatcherism is the new consensus. 1979 was the first post-war General Election in which it mattered who won. We now have a situation in which the Labour Party has been forced, on pain of electoral death, to trail along after Conservative reforms. Council house sales, privatisation, taxation, union reforms - the Tories have made all the running. Ideas that in the sixties were confined to Martell's Freedom Group, Enoch Powell and the IEA are now the official policy of the British Government. It should be obvious to the thickest Labour Party activist (but it isn't, of course) that if the Labour Party goes into the next General Election with a manifesto of scrapping Thatcherism, as it were, it will be annihilated. Socialism is dead.

THE DESTRUCTION OF SOCIAL FREEDOMS

So what am I complaining about? This leads me to my second point. Chris Tame was wrong. It looks that way to me. I refer to his stating in 1983 that Libertarianism was the wave of the future. Maybe it is in economics and the welfare state. But, in what I consider to be the more important sphere of personal behaviour, it seems to be anything but. The statists of Left, Right, and Centre are on the attack - and our defences are either weak or non-existent. In the field of censorship, we have the Mary Whitehouses and Clare Shorts

in an unholy *de facto* alliance to see who can ban more. There was, to put it bluntly, more freedom of expression under Labour. I can remember (with nostalgia) being able to go into a sex shop, put 50p in a slot, and watch a sex film. Now the sex industry's been crippled by the moral collectivists - including the Tory socialists of Westminster Council. No MP has so far had the guts, it seems, to defend our right to read pornography. We have former opponents of censorship (e.g. the Left in general) joining the porn bashers; and the Government planning more censorship of our already neutered television through this new Broadcasting Standards Council. I myself heard, in November 1987, the Chairman of the hideously anti-freedom Conservative Family Campaign expressing his willingness to ally himself with Clare Short. I think they deserve each other.

We have even had our right to watch what we want to in the privacy of our own homes taken away from us by the Video Nasties Act. And the right to free expression has been further eroded by the tightening of the anti-free speech "Racial Incitement" laws as this Government turns a blind eye to McCarthyism in reverse. Instead of Right-wingers getting paranoid about Communists, Left-wingers hound "racists" and "sexists". Labour councils ban children's classics in the name of a "multi-cultural society".

We have the real possibility of an anti-abortion Bill being passed. And imagine the reaction to a politician calling for lowering the age of consent for either straights or gays these days. The obnoxious David Mellor and his ilk have changed our drug laws to overturn the whole principle of people being presumed innocent until proved guilty. I believe, incidentally, in legalising cannabis and that our drug laws are based on the ignorance of hysterical politicians who should try smoking a joint. I have tried cannabis, speed, and cocaine in my time, without becoming an addict.

As for my previous LA topic, *Youth Liberation*, the less said the better. Hysteria about sex, drugs, gambling on fruit machines, petty school rules about appearance, censorship of kids' reading matter, even less say for pupils in running schools - the list is unfortunately endless.

So what's happened to freedom? My own view is that the Socialists who once attacked censorship by the Estab-

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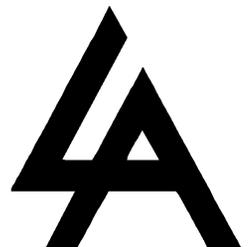
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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY



lishment have now in many areas become the Establishment; they've got power to interfere in people's lives, and, being collectivists, they use it. The Tories? Most of their backbenchers don't have the guts to annoy Thatcher, to put it bluntly. There's nothing more intolerant than a "liberal" who knows he's right. And politicians generally haven't the guts to tell pressure groups to get stuffed.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

What is to be done? Quite simply, although I fear it may be too late, libertarians must take the offensive. For one thing, on all issues of concern to libertarians, the LA should write to the local and national press mentioning both its views and itself; for instance, on the current Clause 28 controversy, we should state that while we believe in the right to be gay, we don't believe in the right of gays to be subsidised by non-gay taxpayers, or for that matter by gay ones.

Libertarians must also denounce all attempts to misappropriate the word "libertarian" by the likes of Roy Hattersley, Tony Benn and Ken Livingstone. (I suppose the fact that these people describe themselves as libertarians shows that the idea's popular, at least.) Libertarians must also involve themselves in single issue campaigns. Why were there none of our banners on the demos against Gillick or Alton?

Most of all, I suggest a strategy of serious and systematic work within the Conservative Party - at least, entry with a view to fighting for freedom inside the only party likely to govern Britain during the rest of this century. I can already see a situation in which the Right opposes censorship and the Left supports it - so let's give it a hand. Why not counter the Conservative Family Campaign with Conservatives for Freedom, for instance - especially as The Freedom Association has, it seems, degenerated into a reactionary pressure group.

The Labour Party, despite the presence in it of libertarians like Ted Goodman (of the National Council for the Repeal of the Obscene Publications Acts) and Terry Liddle, can be pretty much given up; socialists, after all, have traditionally seen fun as a deviation from the class struggle. As for the Liberals - now the SLD - they've had, in the last few years, a President, Des Wilson, who wanted to ban sportsmen from playing in South Africa; a leader, David Steel, who wanted to ban Page Three pin-ups; a Deputy Leader, Alan Beith, who's one of the most authoritarian reactionaries in Parliament - anti abortion, anti drink, anti Sunday trading, and anti pornography; and its youth wing chaired by Felix Dodds, who favoured conscription. It was undoubtedly right to change its name - you could almost say that the forces of freedom in that party died with David Penhaligon. So it must be work within the Tory party - and shout our views from the roof-tops. It must be made plain that Libertarians are not ersatz Tories with a thing about free enterprise, but the real radicals. While we prefer Conservatives to Socialists, our commitment to freedom is more than economic.

I will close by saying that we must prepare ourselves for a long haul but mustn't get disheartened - all pressure groups should look at STOPP. When it was founded in 1968, banning corporal punishment was a dream. Now it's gone from state schools for good and is on its way out in private ones. If they can do it, so can we.

And I do practise what I preach. I've had over a hundred letters in print, many on libertarian themes. I'd be glad of some competition.

FIGHTING FOR SOCIAL FREEDOM:

A REPLY TO MARK TAHA

CHRIS R. TAME



Mark Taha is right *and* wrong.

He is right that the growing abandonment of support for 'moral' and 'social' freedoms by the Tories is an ominous development. It is especially so since, as Mark points out, support for such freedoms is almost as, perhaps even more, absent on the 'left'. The moral panic over drugs, the attempt to deny free speech to racists and Nazis (or anyone who can be plausibly or implausibly labelled such), and the desire to censor pornography now seem to be more central to the contemporary socialist cause than the replacement of the alleged anarchy and exploitation of the market.

Since we are indeed entering a post-socialist period the attack on social freedom by the ascendant 'right' can only be viewed with great trepidation. It is, of course, an inconsistent move. There can be no effective defense of property rights that does not stem from the recognition of the most fundamental property right of all, what John Locke called the property in our own persons. Being free in using and disposing of material private property cannot be severed from being free in what we do with our private parts.

But what then is to be done? Here I think Mark Taha is wrong. Certainly libertarians should take the offensive on these issues, but not in quite the way he states. I don't think corporal punishment ended in British schools because of the activities of STOPP. Rather, STOPP was a *symptom* of a broader tide of ideas which resulted in that legislation. Combatting moral authoritarianism does not mean simply writing letters to the press, or raising LA banners at demonstrations. At the present time we simply do not have enough libertarian activists to make much of an impact doing this. Our efforts should be aimed primarily at serious intellectual work and publication. It is *this* that will eventually alter the tide of ideas in society and swell our ranks generally. Similarly, in spite of press reports that the LA is master-minding Militant-style infiltration of the Conservative Party, we actually discourage many people from this sort of venture. Again, the primary battle must be in the realm of ideas.

Of course, if someone has a real talent for, or enthusiastic interest in, writing letters to the press, marching in demos or working in the Conservative Party we wouldn't discourage him or her from so doing. Mark Taha does indeed have a knack for getting nice little letters into the press. But he also has a lot of knowledge in his head and the ability to write lengthier material. The struggle for moral and social freedoms would be strengthened if he were to devote time to more substantial pieces of writing.