

FREEDOM

Three perspectives on
the meaning of liberty
in the 21st Century

Neal Lawson
Ed Vaizey MP
Jeremy Browne MP

■ About the authors

Neal Lawson

Neal Lawson is chairman of the democratic left pressure group Compass (www.compassonline.org.uk) and managing editor for the Labour journal Renewal (www.renewal.org.uk). He is a Trustee of CentreForum. He is writing a book on shopping and politics called 'All Consuming', for publication by Penguin / Viking in January 2008.

Ed Vaizey MP

Ed Vaizey was elected as the Member of Parliament for Wantage and Didcot in 2005. He started his career at the Conservative party's research department, before becoming a barrister, and then director of a successful PR company. In 2004, he became the chief speech writer for the then Leader of the Opposition, Michael Howard. Since becoming an MP, Ed has joined the Modernisation and Environmental Audit Select Committees and is currently deputy chairman of the Conservatives Globalisation and Global Poverty Policy Group.

Jeremy Browne MP

Jeremy Browne is the Member of Parliament for Taunton. He is also the Liberal Democrat Deputy Foreign Affairs spokesman and a member of the Home Affairs Select Committee.

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■ Foreword

British politics is currently witnessing a vigorous debate about the nature of liberalism. Since liberals are concerned, above all else, with the concept of freedom, this publication comes at an opportune time. It begins with Neal Lawson, left wing provocateur and chairman of Compass, setting out his particular view of freedom. His essay seeks to fuse liberal and socialist ideals in formulating an alternative to what he describes as the dominant, materialistic culture of our times.

Ed Vaizey, Conservative MP for Wantage and Didcot, and Jeremy Browne, Liberal Democrat MP for Taunton then offer a response to Lawson from different points of the political spectrum. The sum total is three contrasting views on what it means to be free — and to be liberal.

■ Freedom and security: the case for a liberal socialism

Neal Lawson
Neal Lawson

Introduction

Politics is about competing conceptions of liberty or freedom. What is it to live freely? This is the question the left should be asking but rarely does. The right, on the other hand, have become the champions of freedom. Conservatives have taken ownership of the word and therefore its meaning. Freedom from the state, from trade unions, freedom of exchange, free markets and free enterprise – the lexicon of freedom is the language of the right. The advertising guru Maurice Saatchi, one-time Tory vice-chair, claims that every brand should be reducible to one word – what he terms a single, universal, recognisable, truth (SURT). If the SURT for BT is ‘talk’, for the Tory party it is ‘freedom’.

But what about the left? Despite the efforts of many clever liberal socialist thinkers such as William Morris, G.D.H. Cole, R.H. Tawney, Anthony Crosland and Roy Hattersley, Labour is perceived as the party of the state and anti-freedom. The left is motivated by the desire to make people more equal but forgets to say why. In part, this failure is tribal. The Liberal Democrats are Labour’s electoral enemy – therefore notions of liberalism, liberty and thus freedom are deemed out of bounds. But the failure is also cultural and economic. The liberal left lost out to the centralising Webbs and Fabians in the fight to define socialism in the early 20th century. The failure to contest the terrain of freedom left the field open to the right. As a consequence, the left now lives in the dark shadow of a

Thatcherised version of freedom. New Labour has largely failed to challenge the neo-liberal definition of commercialised freedom, and has even opened up new areas of society to the market.

Equality should remain fundamental to the left but only within the wider and more ambitious project to redefine freedom as the inspirational value of socialism. To achieve such a lofty aim it is necessary to provide a critique of the neo-liberal view of freedom and make the case for a new kind of politics that embraces society's ambivalence about freedom and security. This, in turn, demands the re-unification of the liberal and socialist traditions.

It is 100 years since the Liberal landslide of 1906 and the establishment of the Labour Representation Committee. Kier Hardy, the Labour leader, wanted a progressive consensus of radical liberals and socialists. Despite initial warm relations, the eventual split between socialists and social liberals led to the enduring division of progressive thinking and organisation. One consequence was that the 100 years since were essentially a Conservative century. Today, neither social democrats nor liberals can deliver a progressive consensus on their own. What Neil Sherlock and I wrote in 2001 still holds: "Without the right leaders, movements and ideas, the next shift in British politics is likely to be to the right."¹ This can still be another Tory century illuminated at its start, like the last, by wasted progressive potential. Liberals think social democrats are too trusting of the state. Social democrats think liberals place too much store in the market. But the politics of liberty and freedom are increasingly contested territory. David Cameron made the first of many pitches for liberal ground when last December he declared "I'm a liberal Conservative". As this essay will demonstrate, I am a liberal socialist and believe in freedom above all else.

The neo-liberal version of freedom

Neo-liberals champion a very particular version of freedom. They seek to ensure that the free market is the guiding force of all human action. The neo-liberal ideal is freedom from the state, from obligations to others, from interference, from rules and regulations. It is freedom for capital and the people who own it; freedom of privilege and power to enjoy life more than others. For neo-liberals, freedom is a positional good that you value only if you have more of it than those around you.

The term liberalism is used to describe a broad range of political thinking which stretches from Hayek on the right to Rawls on the left. Neo-liberalism is a particular subset of liberalism based on the notion of economically rational man constrained only by a minimal but strong state. Neo-liberalism equates individual liberty solely with free markets. In contrast, 'social liberalism' suggests individual liberty requires some kind of collective welfare provision. Both of these visions are part of the liberal tradition but come to very different conclusions about what it means to be free.

Because neo-liberalism equates markets and economic rationalism with liberty itself any restrictions on markets represents a curtailment of freedom. According to the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, "Capitalism defines freedom as the ability to guide one's behaviour solely by means-ends calculus, without needing to concern oneself with other considerations."²

As such neo-liberalism does not signify a return to classic liberalism, but is rather a new and potentially deadly strain for anyone who believes that there is such a thing as society. Karl Polanyi, author of the influential work 'The Great Transformation', wrote that the debasement of the concept of freedom "into a mere advocacy of free enterprise can only mean the fullness of freedom for those whose income, leisure and security need no enhancing, and a mere pittance of liberty for the people, who may in vain attempt to make use of democratic rights to gain shelter from the power of the owners of property."³

For neo-liberals the market is not a natural phenomenon but must be actively constructed. It is an audacious attempt to make the world in their image. Wendy Brown, an academic at Berkeley, argues: "Neo-liberalism does not simply assume that all aspects of social, cultural and political life can be reduced to such a calculus, rather it develops institutional practices and rewards for enacting this vision."⁴ The neo-liberal definition of freedom has become the hegemony of our times. One politically loaded definition, ironically devoid of competition, is accepted as a universal truth.

The reach of this neo-liberal conception of freedom is breathtaking. The goal is not just to structure financial markets and the global economy in a way that works for corporate

interest, it is also to influence fundamentally the behaviour and alter the beliefs of people themselves. Freedom, neo-liberal style, goes to the heart of what it is to be human. Mrs Thatcher said: "Economics are the method, but the objective is to change the soul."⁵ Neo-liberals want to mould people in line with their particular conception of freedom. The revered 19th century sociologist Max Weber argued that modern societies are characterised by control and the obligation to conform to the instrumental needs of the economic system. A person for the neo-liberals is only useful in so much as he or she supports the functioning of the economic system.

If previous economic systems were reliant on repression to ensure domination, modern consumer capitalism, which is the operating mode of neo-liberalism, achieves control through seduction. Consumption has replaced religion as the opium of the masses. We construct and reconstruct our identities through what we buy, purchasing not just goods but also experiences. How can the left argue against the thrill of the till?

The less freedom we have to create a different kind of world through political and democratic action, the more we rely on the market to fulfil our needs. But if the market is to function freely, our ability to use the state and democracy to regulate and manage the economy must be curtailed. The relationship between democratic action and the market is thus a zero-sum game.

The first wave of neo-liberalism in the 1980s opened up the space for markets and broke the spirit of social democracy; the second wave is seeking to use the state to equip people to meet the perceived challenge of globalisation. Thatcherism was a blunt instrument for reshaping the economy and society. New Labour has therefore enacted some measures to humanise and regulate the market, such as the minimum wage. But the limits and timidity of these interventions merely confirm Labour's role as a point of continuum in the neo-liberal revolution (just as Cameron's compassionate Conservatives are playing their part in softening the harsh edges of neo-liberalism). Of course, economic rationalism with a human face is better than its unmasked predecessor – but it fails to challenge the direction of travel of the dominant economic system. The philosopher John Gray says of Tony Blair: "He believes that modernisation is a

process that can only have one result, the universal spread of American style market states – and that anyone who resists this happy outcome is struggling against the irresistible forces of history.”⁶ The Prime Minister confirmed this view when he wrote recently that “complaining about globalisation is as pointless as trying to turn back the tide”.⁷

The New Labour critique of Thatcherism is that it refused to use the state actively to prepare people for global competition. Hence the huge focus on education, skills and other supply side reforms. New Labour challenged the means but never the ends of the neo-liberal project. The freedom to manage, acquire, own, speculate, accumulate, shop till you drop are identically promoted. The implications of this for social democracy are clear. Instead of managing markets in the name of society, society is managed in the interests of capitalism.

The problem with the neo-liberal conception of freedom is that it is always freedom for the few, not the many. The brilliance of the neo-liberal ideal is the way it sets up an absolute theoretical liberty for all and crushes every competing theory of freedom in its path. The neo-liberal idea rules out alternative ways of being free. And within this emerging mono-culture of market freedom we are unable to unpick, challenge or criticise not just the principles and practice of global markets but the obvious instances of market failure. If capitalism is allowed to define freedom then capitalism itself becomes untouchable. The market is not free or perfect. It is riven by monopolies and distorted by vested interests. It regularly needs to be saved through the intervention of governments. But the scope and ability of the state to control the market in society’s interest is being eroded fast.

The grip of market freedom

Notions of freedom can only be understood in relation to the flip side of human need – security. Until the second half of the last century the priority for most of the people, most of the time, was security. The struggle was against cold and hunger. For the majority, in the West at least, the pressing needs of survival are no longer a daily struggle. As we advance up psychologist Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, we move from materialism to post-materialism and a search for meaning through

self-fulfilment by realising our creative potential. The brilliance of market freedom is that it provides the basis for self-fulfilment through consumerism. It is as consumers that we find ways to be expressive and creative. It is a world in which we are free to be ourselves through what we buy. It is freedom purchased through the symbolic competition of owning and experiencing more and better than those around us. What we buy is not for natural survival but emotional survival. It is the way we keep score, place ourselves against others and motivate ourselves. There is only one freedom that matters to the masses today – it is the freedom to consume.

In the world of Max Weber it was the producer who served the interests of the economic order. Today it is our role as consumers through which the interests of advanced capitalism are secured. Economies run on the basis of consumer confidence and consumer debt. Designers create new desirable products while advertisers turn wants into needs. Because such needs are emotional, there is by definition no end to the number of times we want to upgrade our mobiles and revamp our kitchens. Consuming can be fun. It can be exhilarating. We all do it. But we go on doing it – expecting it to make us happy and contented. It never works because it isn't designed to stop us shopping but keep us going. Rewarded, but not enough that we will not want to shop again. The prize of self-actualisation through consumption is designed to be illusive – there is always something we need next, something that someone else has got that makes them look and feel freer than us.

Today freedom is found under the knife of the plastic surgeon, in the pages of glossy magazines and cool of the designer outlets. Fashions and fads circulate at an ever increasing rate. People continually race to keep up because being a successful consumer defines what it is to be 'normal' in today's world. The more we invest in our private worlds the less time and money we have for society. The more markets expand and commodify in the name of freedom, the less belief we have in collective provision. As Bauman argues, the less freedom exists in other spheres of social life, through institutions like trade unions, local government, political parties and the church, the stronger "the popular pressure on the further extension of consumer freedom – whatever its costs".⁸ So dwindling collective freedom is

mitigated by increased individual freedom. We spend more on private goods and less on public services. But cuts in welfare provision make no one feel more secure or free. Shopping buys off the revolution but it doesn't quell the anxiety of lives lived out of our control. The more we retreat from the public realm, the more we have nowhere to go but our own private, relentlessly consumerised world.

The hegemony of neo-liberal freedom is extended still further by the mood of those excluded from this consumer society. The new poor do not want power to overthrow their oppressors like the excluded of the past: they want the freedom to consume. The rich are not their enemies but their heroes. In the world of consumer capitalism what is dying is the potential agency of change.

The neo-liberal version of freedom drives the economy and the economy drives this version of freedom. Freedom to choose in every instance in every sphere of life has become the dominant value of modern life. Is this a perfect model of social control, a world where our only desire is to desire?

The failure of the left

The Labour party's philosophy has always drawn on a variety of different strands of thinking, from Methodism to Guild Socialism, mutualism and syndicalism. But the tradition of 'Labourism', that was never codified or theorised, has dominated party practice to this day. Labourism is epitomised by the term 'socialism is what Labour Governments do' and is a creation of its age. Influenced by the economics of Fordism, and the politics of Leninism and Fabianism, it adopts a paternalistic, centralising, top down view of socialism in the name of material equality. For labourism, fairness always takes priority over freedom. It is managerial rather than moral socialism. Labourism was sustained by the powerful myth that with a growing working class "history was on our side", and that successive election victories would enable Labour governments to usher in a socialist world.

I was an early and enthusiastic advocate of New Labour because I thought, at least in part, it wanted to move beyond labourism. Instead, it has become a strange hybrid that could be described as 'neo-labourism'. It has enthusiastically embraced the

individualised and consumerised society but has held on to much of its Labourist past. So New Labour centralises, regulates and tells us that socialism is ‘what works’ but in the name of choice, competition and commercialisation. Alan Milburn recently warned that “we can’t let the right be the voice of the me generation”.⁹ Instead of seeing this ‘me generation’ as a social construct, New Labour appears determined to champion it before David Cameron has the chance. The only option for Labour is to do the Tories’ dirty work now on its own terms – or they will do it on theirs.

This neo-labourism embraces some forms of liberty. It is culturally at ease with our times, another key departure from Thatcherism. Blair has written about “a society with rules but without prejudices”.¹⁰ New Labour is relaxed about homosexuality but also about the domination of society by financial capital and media moguls. Blairism is a social and economic form of liberalism but one increasingly tinged by a strong state. As Will Davies has explained, the politics of consumerism creates the conditions in which rampant egoism can take root in the form of anti-social behaviour, as liberation without constraint becomes a destructive force.¹¹ Wendy Brown rather chillingly claims that “the neo-liberal citizen is calculating rather than rule abiding” and therefore prone to break the law in the quest for consumer freedom because getting what you want, no matter what the means, is the overriding goal of life.¹² So people denied the means to take their place as ‘normal’ citizens through consumerism cheat and steal. The state is then forced to try and control anti-social behaviour, through measures like ASBOs, because it will not countenance constraining the market. There are echoes here of Andrew Gamble, the political economist, who interpreted Thatcherism as ‘a free market and a strong state’. The social disorder generated by untrammelled market freedom requires greater repression by the state. Only the coercive power of the law can now force this ‘me generation’ not to do the things free markets encourage them to do.

What New Labour offers is the freedom of a meritocracy – that is the freedom not just to be socially mobile but also to face the horror of failure for which there is no one to blame but yourself. A nightmare made worse by the insufferable arrogance of winners who have only themselves to thank. The state will

provide a hand up but success or failure is down to us. Ultimately we get what we deserve. Blairism shares a darkly pessimistic Hobbesian view of liberty – that people need to be forced into the ‘freedom’ of each against all through a combination of market choice mechanisms, centralised diktat and increasing authoritarianism. The problem for New Labour is not just that its meritocracy is failing in its own terms as Britain becomes less socially mobile, but forcing people ‘to be free’ sits awkwardly with any real notion of individual choice.

The paradox of freedom and security

If a democratic and liberal left wants to overcome the limitations and dangers of the New Labour accommodation with neo-liberalism, the starting point must be the recognition that the dominant mood of our times is ambivalence. We are the first generation free of the demands of material survival but have launched ourselves headlong into the hedonism of unrestricted consumption. But the pangs of social loss are far from extinguished. We want freedom and security at the same time. What we want more than anything else is risk-free freedom. But what we want is not possible because market freedom and risk go hand in hand. The ambivalence is reinforced by the fact that the results for winners and losers in the game of freedom are blurred. Losers are consoled they might win next time, while the joy of the winner is tempered by the reality that they could be the next losers. Nothing is ever settled. Everything is uncertain and anxious. The mood was beautifully summed up by an anonymous Downing Street policy adviser who described the public as teenagers – caught between “independence and paternalism”.¹³

This ambivalence means we are never satisfied. Bauman talks about “intoxicating freedom and horrifying uncertainty”.¹⁴ He adds: “If dull and humdrum days haunted the seekers of security, sleepless nights are the curse of the free. In both cases, happiness goes by the board ... freedom without security assures no more steady a supply of happiness than security without freedom.”¹⁵ Consolation and comfort can only be found in the endless cycle of consumption.

The pull and push of our desire for freedom and our need for security act as the motor of political change. They are two

equally attractive and unattractive extremes that we bounce between. We are homesick and we are sick of being at home. We oscillate between the public and private spheres, between what feels free and what makes us secure. Writers, such as Ted Sorensen and Albert Hirschman, have traced a pendulum swing of politics as societies move right in the desire for freedom, get so far and swing back to the left in pursuit of security. This cycle is of course reflected in the ebb and flow of the electoral fortunes of the main parties.

This dualism is reflected in all of us. We have the capability to be cooperative and/or competitive, individualistic and/or social. We live our lives permanently at a crossroads between freedom and security. This is the conundrum that we continuously face: state domination or a private hell, the vertigo of freedom or the straitjacket of prison life. But now that see-saw, that continual flow back and forth, may be out of kilter, no longer going round in a cycle but settling in an ever more lopsided fashion towards market freedom and the private individual. Society is fast losing its ability to bounce back and reclaim ground lost to the market. Choice, commercialisation, commodification and competition are becoming the only basis for judgement, the only ways to measure efficiency, the sole route to hold managers and leaders to account. David Harvey says: "To presume that markets and market signals can best determine all allocative decisions is to presume that everything can in principle be treated as a commodity."¹⁶ As soon as New Labour accepted the inevitability of untrammelled markets then how can it be otherwise?

There are many consequences of this emerging market monoculture. The possessive individual trumps any concerns for equality, the community or the planet. But the triumph of freedom is first and foremost felt in our loss of security. It is society that has to be sacrificed in the name of individual freedom. Trade unions are marginalised as managers are given a free hand to manage no matter what the consequences for their employees. The interests of producers are trampled under our needs as consumers – as if we weren't all both consumers and producers. Public services and the public realm are distorted beyond their original purpose as material and emotional havens from the market. Perhaps the biggest loss is the serial diminution of the one way in which society can express itself – democracy.

If democracy cannot deliver real liberty it withers.¹⁷ Democracy is debased if society is debased. Democracy is not just the right to vote – but the right to be an equal citizen. The growth in the gap between the rich and poor is linked to the decline in democracy. It is no coincidence that the high point of democracy in Britain was the high point of equality during the years of the post War social democratic settlement. The welfare economics of post War capitalism created the basis for a class settlement on terms acceptable to both sides of the industrial divide. Neo-liberalism, however, erodes the possibility for any counter-balancing force by destroying civil society. Today there is no alternative to the free market. Blairism, like Clintonism, is ruled by the principle that “it’s the economy, stupid”. As Wendy Brown argues: “There is nothing in liberal democracy’s basic institutions or values, from free elections, representative democracy, and individual liberties equally distributed, to modest power-sharing ... that inherently meets the test of serving economic competitiveness or inherently withstands a cost benefit analysis.”¹⁸

A new conception of freedom: managing the paradox

How can liberal socialists reclaim freedom? To break out of the clutches of neo-liberalism, the liberal left has to reconcile itself with the freedom and security paradox. It is impossible to square the circle between these two impulses. But the process through which we try to balance our competing desires lies at the root of a much richer view of freedom. The process is of course democracy, and can only be valued as the means by which we strive towards the good life and the good society by managing the tensions freedom and security create.

The essential premise of the left is that for the individual to flourish, the interest of society must sometimes come first: democracy is the instrument with which we resolve such tensions. But this also requires the left to accept that individualism is a good thing. The left should embrace a world no longer governed by deference, statism or centralism. It is ‘individuation’ – the process by which society is reconfigured solely to meet the demands of the individual as consumer that the left must resist.

Gordon Brown is one of the few British politicians who is grappling with this paradox. In his Hugo Young Memorial Lecture he argued not just for a passive view of liberty, but liberty in its active sense – people empowered to participate, to self govern, to realise their potential. He said: “In each generation we have found it necessary to renew the settlement between individual, community and the state.”¹⁹ If the left is to recapture the imagination of the country, defying either the fatalism of New Labour or the compassionate Conservative embrace of Cameron then it must redefine freedom on its own terms. This new definition has four key aspects:

1. Freedom demands we do things together

We have never felt freer to buy what we want and shape our lives as individuals – but we have never felt less free to change the world around us. Our apparent inability to reshape the democratic process is demonstrated by the decline of trust in politicians and involvement in the formal political process at every level. Empowered as consumers, we are enfeebled as citizens. Alternatives to consumer capitalism are off the mainstream political agenda.

What sort of freedom is it that denies us the ability to change our world? If we want to shape our world, then we can only do it together. Neo-liberalism builds concentrations of power in global business and finance. States concentrate ever greater power in the executive to ‘modernise’ society along lines dictated by the market. Thus the freedom of social solidarity outside of these two spheres becomes increasingly important if alternatives to neo-liberalism are to remain viable. The challenge is to come up with ways of forming new forms of collective action that empower people to take control of their lives. This cannot be achieved through the old ways, such as centralisation, hierarchy or deference. Rather, associations must be voluntary, autonomous, accountable and often local. This is freedom defined as autonomy or self-management, whereby people have the maximum possible say in what they want and how they want to achieve it. Harvard philosopher Peter Koestenbaum says: “Our institutions are transformed the moment we decide they are ours to create.”²⁰ The academic, Alan Finlayson, has put it this way: “True choice, unlike market choice, requires the possibility that we might change the terms on which choices are offered to us.

For choice to be real, government must be prepared to limit the market and support the autonomous choices of free communities.”²¹

But if we want this freedom of autonomy then we have to curtail some of our individual freedoms. We have to assign some of the resources, energy and time that go into consumerism and use them for collective goods and the process of collective decision making, namely democracy. It can happen at work through organisations like trade unions, or in our neighbourhoods through groups like the East London Citizens Organisation which bring together local faith groups, schools and workers to campaign for affordable housing and a living wage. It can be a collectivism expressed through pressure groups or campaigns like Make Poverty History or Greenpeace. It can be based on changing or improving schools, parents in Sure Start schemes or movements like ‘Slow Food’ which seek to stem the tide of fast food and fast lives.

We must demand the right to choose not just the small things that we eat, wear and experience, but the big things that really shape our lives. Individual freedom is impossible without connections, co-operation and care with and for others. To do otherwise is to fall into the trap identified by the sociologist Ulrich Beck, namely finding individual solutions to socially created problems. But collective action demands a public realm, not just a state, a market or a private sphere. This is the arena the Greeks called the *agora*. Too many of today’s politicians exhibit a strange form of agoraphobia – a fear of the public realm. Civil society must act as the counter balance to the relentless march of the market.

2. Freedom demands greater equality

Securing freedom requires not just new forms of collectivism but greater equality. The market’s definition of freedom only works in theory. I am free to eat lunch at the Savoy whenever I want – the problem is I cannot afford it. In theory I am free to get any job I can. But what if I don’t even have the bus fare to get to the interview, or a suit, or never hear about the job offer because it was never advertised?

The problem is that the case for increased equality has always been made in isolation, rather than as a means to achieving

greater freedom. This may have worked in the past when resources were scarcer and people died of starvation or cold. Now, in the West at least, it sounds too much like the promotion of dull conformity. Instead, the left should argue that people can only be free to make the most of their lives if they are more equal. We must aspire to a world where people are genuinely free because they are sufficiently equal. Adam Smith did not just write about the role of free markets in creating wealth but the duty governments have in “protecting, as far as possible, every member of society from the injustice or oppression of every other member of it”.²²

It means saying to those who have inherited or ‘earned’ millions that there is something called social justice – that the quality of our lives should not be determined by accidents of birth. We all deserve the freedom to make the most of lives – and that demands greater equality. “Necessitous men are not free men,” said President Roosevelt in his State of the Union address to Congress in 1935.²³

Freedom for all entails limits on what we should own, so that there is a fairer distribution of resources. So tax and redistribution becomes not a necessary evil but a vehicle to spread freedom. Our common humanity requires that ‘because you are worth it’ means ‘we are all worth it’.

3. Freedom demands some constraints

True freedom requires some constraint on individual actions. Indeed, the very notion of the civilised society is based on the control of sexual and aggressive urges. By constraining some individual freedoms, society as a whole benefits from new public freedoms. Take pensions, for example. We know we should save for our retirement but left to our own devices we choose not to, because the pull of the shopping centre is too great. If governments compelled us to save we might complain like mad but most of us would know it was for our own good and accept it. Or consider the environment. The fastest growing contributor to global warming and climate change is air traffic. We need to curb travel or at least pay the real cost of the damage to the environment. The congestion charge has worked in London. Drivers were forced to use public transport or pay the charge and therefore contribute to better public transport. We need

constraints – for our own benefit, for that of society and the future of the planet. Ultimately the definition of freedom must go beyond straightforward materialism. Instead freedom should be found beyond the market in beauty and love, relationships, well-being, creativity and peace.

The principles of constraint should of course be democratically decided, not arbitrarily imposed. But the neo-liberal drive towards an individualised society prioritises the market over democracy and society making it impossible to agree constraints. Gordon Brown quotes Bernard Shaw in his Hugo Young lecture as saying “liberty means responsibility, that is why most men dread it”.²⁴ And Karl Popper recognised that unqualified freedom, just like unqualified control, is bound to produce its opposite. If all social restraints are removed there would be nothing stopping the strong dominating the weak.

4. Freedom in relation to the state

The final element of the left’s redefinition of freedom relates to the state. Within the context of the need to balance freedom with fairness, the role of the state will always be important in terms of co-ordination, priority setting and redistribution.

But a liberal socialist must beware of the state becoming an end in itself. Not least because the state can get in the way of civil society – crowding out the very autonomy on which democratic left politics must be based. The state can, unless we are careful, absolve us of responsibility. David Marquand wrote recently that: “Social democratic values cannot be imposed on a passive society by a beneficial state operating at the top. They can only grow from the bottom – from the soil of the concerned, committed and active citizenry.”²⁵

The liberal socialist Carlo Rosselli said that it is through non-state organisations that men and women “learned how to become autonomous political and moral subjects, conscious and responsible citizens, intellectuals able to fit the means to the ends ...representatives who learned to apply democratic rules, administrators who became expert in the exercise of local government.”²⁶

Balancing the competing needs of freedom and security demands that we dare more democracy. This cannot just be a matter of

placing a cross on a ballot paper and dropping it into a box every four years in a distorted 'first past the post' electoral system. Rather it must be about a deeper form of democracy through people organised collectively into associations. The central challenge of the new left is the democratisation of society and the economy. If the likes of David Miliband are serious about a 'double devolution' of power to councils and neighbourhoods, then solidarity, equality and democracy must enter the DNA of Labour. Or Labour must learn to work with others who can help balance equality with liberty, freedom with security.

Has the time for a liberal socialism come again?

The moment for a liberal socialism could be here once more. In many respects this is a case of going 'back to the future'. The basic models are the co-operatives, mutuals, friendly societies and trade unions which first flourished some 150 years ago. What killed off this first wave of liberal socialism was the century long detour via mass production and political centralism. The means of production are now more fluid, local and complex – just as they were before the century of centralisation. Liberal socialism can become modern again. Events have caught up with it.

Gordon Brown, despite the centralising tendencies of the Treasury, seems to be at least aware of this potential. In his Britishness speech to the Fabians in 2006 he said: "For two centuries Britain was defined to the world by its proliferation of local clubs, associations, societies and endeavours – from churches and trade unions to municipal initiatives and friendly societies. I believe that we should ...do more to encourage and empower new British organisations that speak for these British values."²⁷ Whether they are specifically British values is a moot point, but Brown is surely right to call for a return to self-determination in collective organisations.

Socialists will find themselves painted into a corner if they fail to embrace this opportunity to redefine freedom. Socialism cannot become an historical accident defined only by the coincidence of centralism, deference, poverty and class, rather than a moral ideal applicable to more than one period. Some believe all we can do is to accommodate ourselves to the neo-liberal project and through spin call it socialism. Either way neo-liberalism is fast

emerging as the only political force left to manage post-industrial, post-material societies.

To challenge the emerging neo-liberal hegemony, socialism must decisively break with Labourism. Instead of seeing itself as an ideal type, socialism must become again a moral ideal. Liberal socialism is a journey to be pursued through the liberal model as we continually try, fail and try again to balance freedom with fairness, the individual with society, equality with liberty. In an illuminating debate between David Marquand and Anthony Giddens in *Prospect* magazine, Giddens talks about the creation of a 'social democratic society' – a concept which Marquand found absurd.²⁸ He describes social democracy not as an outcome but as a process. Social democracy is just that – the democratisation of our society – the empowerment of people to take control of their lives and change their world as they see fit. Eduard Bernstein, the founding intellect of modern social democracy, told the socialist movement at the dawn of the last century that "the means are everything – the end means nothing". 100 years on it is still the process values of democracy that matter most.

The left must accept that socialism is a philosophy of liberty. But it is only one possible philosophy of liberty. If liberals and socialists cannot see beyond party labels and petty political prejudices then neo-liberalism is bound to win. The left should remember that it was the liberal Sir William Beveridge whose post War welfare reforms laid the foundations for freedom from want. The liberal economist John Maynard Keynes provided the model of demand management that sustained full employment and the welfare state. And liberals must accept the need for democratic collective action if we are to manage the interests of society over those of the market.

Carlo Rosselli sums up the progressive view of freedom: "Liberalism is the ideal force of inspiration, and socialism is the practical force of realisation."²⁹ As such Rosselli provides an echo of Bernstein's dictum that "social democracy is organised liberalism". Socialists and liberals can only challenge the neo-liberal orthodoxy by together devising a politics that is pluralist, radically democratic, egalitarian and green.

Conclusion

Human nature will never be satisfied because of the paradoxical relationship between our desire for freedom and our need for security. We will contort and contradict ourselves in an elusive and never-ending search for fulfilment. But we must develop the ability, through collectivism, equality and constraint to ensure that the struggle continues by making the market the servant of society – not its master. Neo-liberalism comes from the liberal family tree, but it carries the seeds of destruction of democracy. The supremacy of economic rationalism over political, social and democratic rights threatens the existence of those rights. Capitalism has no morality; it knows no boundaries or constraints. Its creative and destructive beauty is the dynamic that ruthlessly produces winners and losers. But consumerised capitalism can only be constrained by a democratic society. Without such a society there is nothing that cannot be commoditised in the name of profit.

When New Labour argues for economic efficiency in the name of social justice, it is playing with political fire. It is the demands of economic efficiency that are invariably prioritised when social justice is defined by such efficiency. Because of this belief that only markets can deliver fairness, we are fast reaching a tipping point at which the ability of society to manage capitalism will have eroded beyond the scope for effective action. The luxury of division is something that liberals and socialists cannot afford for much longer. Without a focus on liberty and democracy, the dreams of the left for a better world will turn into the nightmare of a permanent neo-liberal market state.

The writer Noam Chomsky said: “We have today the technical and material resources to meet man’s animal needs. We have not developed the cultural and moral resources – or the democratic forms of social organisation – that make possible the humane and rational use of our material wealth and power.”³⁰ A new liberal socialism could be the means by which wealth and power is used to set humanity free.

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■ A conservative vision of freedom

Ed Vaizey MP

Like all good polemicists, Neal Lawson relies on a caricature to establish his argument. Lawson, the Don Quixote of the New Left, has invented a windmill at which to tilt: a political philosophy which, he says, aims at “freedom from the state, from obligations to others, from interference, from rules and regulations”. Lawson suggests that this philosophy uses modern consumer capitalism as its operating mode. “There is only one freedom that matters to the masses today – it is the freedom to shop”. This, says Lawson, leads to a society of rampant egoism, liberation without constraint and, ultimately, to the destruction of society and a loss of security. He calls it “neo-liberalism ... a new and potentially deadly strain”. And there I was, thinking all we had to worry about was bird flu.

Liberal socialism is still socialism

To counter this insidious downward spiral, Lawson suggests a form of active liberty which empowers people to take control of their lives. What does this mean in practice, according to Lawson? It means that there must be more collective action. It means that there must be an emphasis on equality, that “there should be limits on what we should own so that there is a fairer distribution of resources”. It means that there should be “at least some constraint on individual actions”. And it means that the state must step in to guarantee fairness.

My précis has, I think, been fair to Lawson, even to the extent that I can acknowledge his argument as seductive. But of course,

all Lawson is advocating is a form of 21st century socialism. And as Lawson well knows, socialism does not work. In fact, it creates the kind of society which Lawson, who believes in freedom, should be fighting against. The sort of society where the state controls every action of the individual, until ultimately the individual himself becomes dispensable.

Lawson's neo-liberalism ain't mine – or anyone else's

Lawson seeks to hide his true purpose behind an attack on neo-liberalism. The trouble with Lawson's argument is that his depiction of neo-liberalism as a philosophy is more JG Ballard than Frederick Hayek – the “afternoon shopping malls of limitless mediocrity” depicted in ‘Super Cannes’.

No one wants, as the conservative writer William Roepke once wrote, “mass society ...a sandheap of individuals ...depersonalised ...isolated, uprooted, abandoned and socially disintegrated”. No conservative tradition, either in theory or in practice, has ever subscribed to the sort of free-wheeling anarchy that Lawson seems to fear. In fact, the conservative mind, of whatever disposition, *demand*s that freedom is balanced by responsibility. “A free society”, says Hayek, “probably demands more than any other that people be guided in their action by a sense of responsibility which extends beyond the duties exacted by the law”. Another conservative thinker, Russell Kirk, famously denounced those who “declare that the test of the market is the whole of political economy and morals ...or who assure the public that great corporations can do no wrong”. Three cheers to that.

Conservatives do not wish to dispense with government – far from it. Government is there, as Milton Friedman pointed out, to enforce the rules of the game. Government is necessary because absolute freedom is impossible. “One man's freedom”, as Friedman acknowledged “must be limited to preserve another man's freedom”. So a conservative will expect the state to carry out its primary functions, of defence of the nation, preservation of the rule of law, enforcement of contracts, break up of monopolies, education, healthcare, social services and so on.

But to understand that there are limits to the market is not the same as condemning the market. That is the politics of envy, another driver towards socialism. Lawson again takes refuge in

the cliché that his freedom is somehow restricted because he cannot dine regularly at the Savoy. In essence, Lawson equates economic pressure with political pressure. But Lawson cannot on the one hand condemn consumerism – which by its very nature makes more products available to more people – and then condemn his lack of access to a consumer good. The Savoy exists to cater for a variety of needs. It is a private enterprise which pays taxes and which employs people who also pay tax. Because it is not open to all, it does not mean that it performs no meaningful function in society.

A conservative recognises that the free market – or capitalism – is not simply about private property but also represents, according to Michael Novak, “a social order favourable to alertness, inventiveness, discovery, research, the freedom to create and the right to enjoy one’s own creativity”.

Liberal conservatives – more Whig than Tory

Inadvertently, however, Lawson’s polemic does present a challenge to conservatives of a liberal disposition. Essentially, the liberal conservative has to define himself not only in opposition to socialism, but also in opposition to competing strains of conservatism. The temporary defeat of socialism in Britain, set for a return under Gordon Brown, has forced conservatives in on themselves. The lack of a clearly defined enemy has paralysed conservatism as a force for political action, from which it is only just beginning to emerge.

Oliver Letwin, now in charge of policy for the Conservative party, once described himself as “three-quarters Whig and a quarter Tory”. David Cameron now describes himself as a ‘liberal Conservative’. Both, it seems to me, are attempting to define a new vision of conservatism which is focused on the future. It is a conservatism that celebrates change and does not fear the future. It is a conservatism that is comfortable with diversity. But it is still a conservatism that recognises the strength of tradition, the importance of history, and the necessity of national identity.

Of course, Letwin and Cameron are essentially picking up on developments in conservatism over the last 50 years. Frederick Hayek, made a Companion of Honour by Margaret Thatcher and revered by conservatives, famously wrote an essay entitled

“Why I am not a Conservative”. Perhaps he should more accurately said that he was not a Tory. Hayek preferred to call himself an Old Whig, because he identified conservatives as those who favoured the status quo, rather than being engaged in the active pursuit of liberty. Hayek pointed out that Whigs and Conservatives often found themselves in an alliance only because they both opposed socialism and its encroachments on human liberty. What unites them still is opposition to *imposed* change, an aversion to any centrally-planned, rational masterplan for a nation or a people. “The chief need”, as Hayek pointed out, “is to free the process of spontaneous growth from the obstacles and encumbrances that human folly has erected ...to pretend to know the desirable direction of change seems to me to be the extreme of hubris. Guided progress would not be progress”.

What divides the Whigs from the Tories is the former’s willingness to embrace and adapt to change and progress, what the writer Virginia Postrel has defined as the conflict between ‘stasists’ and ‘dynamists’. There is a strain of Tory thought that is opposed to change and progress of almost any kind. Russell Kirk, for example, the author of ‘The Conservative Mind’, condemned the motor car as a ‘mechanical Jacobin’. A liberal conservative does not fear change or rail against progress, provided it is not imposed from above. As ‘dynamists’, we belong, like Michael Novak who moved gradually from the left to the right, “to what used to be the Whig tradition; its vision of progress is quite different from that of the ‘progressives’ – a term captured by socialist ways of thought. In offering an alternative to the socialist dream of the future, it has captured the idea of the future. It is more realistic, more likely to work, proven in its successes. In these respects, this vision (for which I would have preferred the name ‘neo-liberal’) is a much greater threat to leftists than conservatives have ever been. That is why it infuriates leftists.”

Liberal conservatism as social liberalism

As well as competing against economic conservatives, liberal conservatives also compete against social conservatives, who have a prescriptive (and in my view therefore unconservative) view of how society should be organised. The liberal conservative, who believes in progress, variety and diversity,

does not judge people by their background, or necessarily by their lifestyle, provided it does not harm other people. Rather we judge them on what they are able and willing to contribute to society. While the family is the basic building block of society, there are many other forms of social organisation that are not necessarily based on the family unit. The question is not whether these units are necessarily as 'valid' as the family unit. Rather, it is a recognition that society organises itself in many different ways. Such ways should not be condemned out of hand, simply because they do not meet a prescriptive mind set, all the more so if those members of a society are contributing beneficially towards it.

It is precisely because I believe in society that I mistrust the role of the state. Too often, the state crowds out and fundamentally undermines the role of society, and with it society's wonderful diversity. Sometimes the state forces people to adopt lifestyles they would not otherwise choose were they free – such as when welfare rules force people to split up. Lawson's lament, about a lack of democracy and empowerment of the individual, is precisely based on the fact that the state continues to grow in size. The bigger it gets, the less able it is to take account of our diversity and individuality. And so it makes us less free.

Liberal conservatism, democracy and authoritarian conservatism

Even at parish council level, citizens who give their spare time voluntarily to the community are now expected to subscribe to a 'tick box culture', a 'one size fits all' approach where filling in forms becomes a substitute for action and creativity. Their motives are treated with suspicion, to the extent that they cannot even speak on local planning issues that affect them and their neighbours. No wonder people are angry, or giving up, or both. On this point at least, Lawson seems to agree.

The conservative who believes in freedom understands that the best guarantee of freedom is to devolve power down to the most local level possible. The best bulwark of liberty against the state are Burke's 'little platoons'. What that means in practice is that the liberal conservative will support local decision-making in schools, health, policing and welfare. By making local people

responsible for the institutions that affect their lives, you give them back control over the things that affect their lives.

A number of Conservative MPs and activists recently published a pamphlet called 'Direct Democracy'. As they pointed out, "the parties of the Right have succeeded by championing devolution, localism, direct democracy, personal freedom. They have shown that far from wanting to use the machinery of the state to impose their ideology on their peoples they are prepared to push powers outwards and downwards." It is a courageous view. This approach leads to pluralism, diversity and variety, which can make life uncomfortable for politicians in a political culture that, for the last fifty years, has adopted the mantra that the bed pan clattering on the ward floor should be heard in Whitehall.

There is a clear way forward. Regional assemblies, wildly unpopular when tested in a referendum, should be abolished. Powers must return from Brussels. And the power and status of local government must be strengthened. "National" services such as health, welfare, and policing, must be devolved in a meaningful way to the local level, and subject to local democracy – either to local democratic organisations, or even further down to the institutions themselves. This is not simply an arcane debate about political structures, but a genuine desire to empower the citizen.

At present, the trend – apart, it could be argued, from devolution – is all the other way. This too presents a challenge to conservatives, as there is a strain of conservatism – authoritarian conservatism – that believes in increased state control, in a misplaced belief that this brings security. I am not here criticising traditional law and order conservatives. Of course, I recognise the importance of maintaining order and stability. I have no problem supporting 'prison works' or 'zero tolerance', using the existing institutions of our society to enforce the law effectively. But I do have a problem when authoritarian conservatives support ID cards, and extend the power of the police to detain people without trial. My conservatism sees in these measures an unwarranted and ineffective extension of state control. Similarly, I am not seduced by liberal empowerment measures such as the Human Rights Act. To my conservative disposition, to allow the state to define our freedoms is to allow the state further to limit them.

Liberal conservatism and civil society

Ironically, it is often said that conservatives see man as an imperfect being, which is why they reject any form of rational government as essentially flawed because it is man's creation. That is to misconstrue the conservative's mistrust of big government. Rather, the conservative believes that man is as much predisposed to do good as to do evil. The conservative love of the little platoon and the nation state recognises man's ability to create spontaneous and organic order. Further, (Hayek again) "it is part of the ordinary nature of men (and perhaps still more of women) and one of the main conditions of their happiness that they make the welfare of people their chief aim. To do so is part of the normal choice open to us and often the decision generally expected of us".

Look at the levels of philanthropy in capitalist societies. It is true (more so than ever under this government) that the rich have got richer. But those with vast wealth often recognise the need to give back to society. So it is that the richest man in the world, Bill Gates, has also established the richest foundation in the world, to rid Africa of the scourge of malaria. Even with the growth of the size of the state, the level of voluntary activity is still enormous in Britain. The voluntary sector contributes hundreds of billions a year to social services. In my constituency it is still, thankfully, larger than local government. The entire hospice movement has grown organically outside government. The growth of a centralised, monolithic welfare system is gradually removing decision-making from local communities, with shattering consequences. It substitutes the general for the individual, the routine for the specific.

The more we travel down this road, the more we favour government for its own sake. Institutions take on a life of their own. Blair ends up campaigning to save the NHS, not to save the patients that use it. The sole test is whether the institution or the producer is satisfied, not the people who use its services. Instead, government must empower the institutions of civil society – communities, families, social enterprise – to ensure the welfare of everyone in our society.

Conclusion

Margaret Thatcher is said to carry a copy of the Gettysburg address in her handbag, with Lincoln's famous words "Government for the people, by the people and of the people". That seems a fairly good manifesto for a liberal conservative. We should perhaps also carry the words of another conservative with us. "Let me give you my vision. A man's right to work as he will. To spend what he earns. To own property. To have the State as servant and not as master. These are the British inheritance." Margaret Thatcher was a liberal conservative who understood that man has a right to be free and with that freedom, the opportunity to help his fellow man.

■ 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.