

THE ONLY WAY IS ETHICS

Liberals will always be on weak ground if they argue for liberty and freedom in purely abstract terms, says Simon Titley

When Liberals express their values, the words they most commonly use are 'liberty' and 'freedom'. But what does this ethic actually mean in concrete terms?

The great liberal intellectual Ralf Dahrendorf was in no doubt what liberty meant. He began his 1974 Reith Lectures ('The New Liberty') by recalling an unpleasant wartime experience from his teenage years:

"The elementary desire to be free is the force behind all liberties, old and new. Indeed, there is little need to explain what this desire is, and some of us have found out about it in ways which we will not forget.

"I can still see myself, pacing up and down my cell in the prison of Frankfurt-on-Oder in November 1944 (I was 15-and-a-half at the time), clutching an almost blunt pencil which I had pinched when the Gestapo officer during my first interrogation had left the room, and trying to write down all the Latin words which I could recollect from school on a piece of brown paper which I had pulled from under the mattress of my bunk.

"The youthful organisation which had brought me into this predicament had been called, somewhat pretentiously, 'Freedom Association of High School Boys of Germany', and it had combined childish things like wearing a yellow pin on the lapel with more serious matters such as the distribution of fly-sheets against the SS-state, which had now caught up with me.

"The concentration camp afterwards was a very different experience, really; dark mornings queuing in icy east wind for a bowl of watery soup, the brutal hanging of a Russian prisoner who had stolen half a pound of margarine, slices of bread surreptitiously passed to a sick or an old man: a lesson in solidarity, perhaps, and, above all, one in the sacredness of human lives.

"But it was during the ten days of solitary confinement that an almost claustrophobic yearning for freedom was bred, a visceral desire not to be hemmed in, neither by the personal power of men, nor by the anonymous power of organisations."

When you have been through an experience like that, any justification of the case for liberty seems superfluous. But most of us have not been through an experience like that, or anything remotely resembling it. We have grown up in a stable democracy where, although things are by no means perfect, we do not live in terror. So the case for liberty has to be argued.

And that argument is made more difficult by the fact that, on the face of it, nobody disagrees with us. Everybody says they believe in democracy and freedom nowadays. No one ever argues for dictatorship the way they did in the 1930s. And in countries less fortunate than our own, even the most dictatorial state feels obliged to call itself 'The Democratic Republic of' (a gesture that Adolf Hitler never bothered with).

Hitler never bothered with elections either (at least

not after he had won his first one). But these days, every dictatorship needs the imprimatur of an election, even if it has been blatantly rigged. So in a superficial sense, the argument has already been won.

But we know that the situation remains highly deficient. The argument is more subtle. It is about how one interprets 'liberty' and 'freedom', and what priority one attaches to them.

Whenever dictatorships are challenged about the lack of freedom, the reply is invariably along similar lines. Freedom and democracy are all very well, they say, but the priority is to feed the people, or build the economy, or ensure security, or wait until the people are better educated. The implication is not that freedom and democracy are necessarily bad, rather that they are not a priority and would get in the way of doing more important things.

MUSCULAR LABOURISM

The idea that liberty is a second-order issue is also widespread among liberals' opponents here in Britain. The Labour Party may have been reinvented by Tony Blair as a thoroughly bourgeois animal, but there remains a thick seam of working class social conservatism running through the party – a culture of muscular Labourism typified by John Reid and David Blunkett, with a visceral contempt for liberal values.

This is why the Labour Party is uncomfortable with civil liberties or the environment. The gruff, tough, Labourist regards both issues as effete bourgeois concerns, and therefore a sign of weakness, and consequently an object of disgust. When Labour MP David Lammy recently extolled the virtues of spanking children, he quickly found the G-spot of that reactionary culture.

Not that the thoroughly bourgeois Mr Blair was any better. True, he helped advance the cause of gay rights, for example. The trouble was, he believed that rights were something the government granted to you instead of something you already had. And insofar as New Labour granted us rights, it regarded this as some sort of indulgence; it certainly wasn't central to Blair's idea of what it meant to be 'modern'.

Blair subscribed to the idea that freedom is a luxury, a political dessert that you can eat only when you've finished your greens. As the post 9/11 response to terrorism showed, Blair and his allies believed that there was a direct trade-off between liberty and security. This belief positioned liberty merely in the 'nice to have' category, where it could always be sacrificed if expedient.

The Conservative Party may have seemed more sympathetic to civil liberties, but its commitment to freedom remains doubtful. One only has to consider the party's hostility to the Human Rights Act to see that.

Elderly provincial Conservatives remain suspicious of freedom; it's all well and good but it can sometimes

go too far. They believe the country went to the dogs in the 1960s (presumably at the point identified by Philip Larkin, “between the end of the Chatterley ban and the Beatles’ first LP”) because people were given more freedom than was good for them. The overriding need of such Tories is to restore the discipline, standards and certainties of an imagined golden age.

Younger metropolitan Conservatives, on the other hand, can’t get enough of freedom. They are not bound by the social conventions of their elders – there is “no such thing as society”, after all. But for them, freedom is something you may exercise only in the limited sphere of the marketplace. It is all about ‘choice’; you can be free to choose a car, a hat or a pot of yoghurt. And some can pick a school or hospital. But you cannot make coherent or meaningful political choices about the sort of society you wish to live in.

The ambivalence of Labour and Tory politicians towards freedom and liberty suggests there is a big space for Liberal Democrats to occupy. The field should be clear for the party to ‘own’ this cause. The trouble is, the party isn’t very good at arguing its case.

The basic problem is that the Liberal Democrats talk about freedom and liberty in abstract terms. Unlike Ralf Dahrendorf, they have not been imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp, and nor have most of their voters, so they cannot appeal to such a dramatic personal experience of loss of freedom.

If you believe that freedom and liberty are a prerequisite for tackling the issues of the day, not tangential to them, this should not be a problem. But the party seems unable to relate freedom and liberty to the lives people lead. It has policies on education, healthcare and crime, and then it has a separate policy on this abstract thing called freedom. This sterile approach was evident most recently in the party’s *Facing the Future* policy document.

Even when the Liberal Democrats do discuss freedom, they tend to talk more about processes than outcomes. They emphasise legal, formal freedoms and neglect real, felt freedom. But people need more than formal political rights; they need to be able to exercise their rights. Indeed, this is essential if the party is serious about encouraging people to take and use power.

So if the Liberal Democrats sincerely believe that freedom and liberty are at the core of their values, these ethics should permeate their policies on bread-and-butter topics and not be treated as a discrete issue. Because if the party disconnects freedom and liberty from people’s everyday concerns, it plays into the hands of its opponents, who can depict liberty as nice-in-theory but a low priority and, moreover, something that must always give way to concerns about security or prosperity. There is a cogent argument that freedom makes us more secure and more prosperous, but we rarely hear it from the Liberal Democrats.

The party’s tendency to discuss freedom and liberty

“Liberal Democrats should be talking about real, felt freedom, not just legal rights and procedures”

in abstract terms was identified as a problem by Chris Rennard in the 1990s. He realised that banging on about electoral reform, for example, made the party look like a group of obsessives who were out of touch with the concerns of ordinary people. Unfortunately, the chosen remedy was to drop the subject entirely and talk about

bread-and-butter issues in conventional terms.

This strategy eventually led to the absurdity of party leaders talking about ‘hard-working families’ and ‘Alarm Clock Britain’. The objective seemed to be to blend in with the other main parties, and the Liberal Democrats succeeded only too well.

It is because the Liberal Democrats have such difficulty talking about freedom in meaningful terms that I have been regularly referring to the concept of ‘agency’ in my writing. By ‘agency’, I mean the capacity of individuals to make meaningful choices about their lives and to influence the world around them. I define freedom in these terms because it is better to think of freedom as a practical ability than as a theoretical abstraction. Unfortunately, ‘agency’ is jargon in some professional circles but I shall stick with it because it encapsulates the meaning I seek better than any other word I can think of.

Defining freedom in these terms forces us to realise the extent to which the maldistribution of power is at the root of most of our political ills. It also forces us to realise the relationship between exercising freedom and wellbeing. We can then incorporate freedom as an integral part of our policies across the board, rather than tack it on as an afterthought or omit it altogether.

An insistence on agency also counteracts the classical liberal argument that market forces are the only legitimate means by which people may exercise power. Markets have only a limited capacity to provide people with agency, because of disparities of wealth; because of various market imperfections; because using the price mechanism as your only means of expression severely limits what you can say or who you can say it to; but mainly because buying and selling isn’t the only thing or even the main thing that we do in our lives. An insistence on agency means recognising people’s right to act politically, since democratic association is the only power most individual citizens have to stand up to powerful people who monopolise agency for their own selfish ends.

Above all, agency recognises the distinguishing ethic of social liberalism; that formal political rights are not enough and that we also need to be able to exercise those rights. Freedom must be linked to an idea of social justice and a realisation that political rights are more difficult to exploit for people lacking economic or social power. So Liberal Democrats should be talking about real, felt freedom, not just legal rights and procedures. Then we can make the idea of freedom sing, instead of sounding like a bunch of nerds.

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