

POLITICS WITHOUT BLINDSPOTS

SOCIAL LIBERALISM AND POLITICAL MATURITY

To be human is to live as a social being. My world is a world fashioned and shaped by others. My happiness and thriving conditioned by them.

The roads over which I travel, the products I own, the technology I use, the very food I eat are there because others have toiled.

But equally the security I enjoy, the culture that I experience, the support that I receive comes by virtue of my membership of a community.

Even the air that I breathe, the success of man's ceaseless battle against the elements, the future he bequeaths his children depends very little upon his efforts alone.

As the links in communication increase, the development of economies occur and the pace of human interaction accelerates all this becomes more manifest.

It may be possible to be happy in a variety of social worlds but it is seldom possible to be happy without coming to terms with the social world one exists in and contributes to.

An immature thought is that happiness is best secured by exploiting the physical and human resources of one's world to the best of one's ability to satisfy one's desires and achieve one's pleasures.

This policy over time is often modified by **prudence**. Unbridled exploitation of human and physical resources with insufficient regard to the possible reactions of others may not be the most enlightened way of gaining in a sustained way one's goals. Instead we are led to drive bargains with our fellow man, to behave predictably and observe rules. Thus mankind for the most part has learnt for example that reliable commercial interaction can be more profitable than mere acquisition and theft. The goals of commerce are in general amoral and selfish but not rash and counter-productive.

Real political maturity, however, is a step beyond mere prudence. It consists in the recognition not only that one must negotiate within one's social world but that the state of that social world conditions one's life chances. Such recognition in turn prompts the insight that how I conduct myself within my social world helps shape the world I am destined to live in. **Prudence** is supplemented both by **social awareness** and **social responsibility**.

The politically immature believe that a society of self-seeking individuals prudently modifying their behaviour so that self-seeking does not rebound on them can work- in the sense that individuals minimally restrained by social rules can be happy.

Further thought convinces others that such a society can do itself environmental harm, be unpleasant to live in, exhibit appreciable social disharmony and give very little personal security. A society where people mutually insure one another against peril may instead be one which maximises everyone's chances of happiness- as well as developing everyone's talents. As an ideal it seems to require the kind of active state apparatus and intervention in some form favoured by socialism.

However, deeper reflection ought to convince everyone that no state is a *deus ex machina*, a fairy godmother that simply imparts blessings to its children. To perceive the state in such a form is to lapse back into political infantilism.

Political maturity only occurs when citizens take responsibility for the state they help construct and in a self-conscious manner seek to create a social world they would be happy to live in and bequeath to their children.

Such political maturity I call social liberalism. The forms of political immaturity I have sketched above can be identified with *Conservatism* and *Socialism*. Social Liberalism is not an antithesis, a mere gainsaying of these other doctrines; it is a completion of them.

Let me spell out some its key features

- i- **It recognises that sustained human happiness can only exist in a society that permits it**
- ii- **That the pattern of our social relationships crucially determines our happiness**
- iii- **That the state has the ability to adjust this pattern, to forge fair moral bargains between the types of people who make up our world**
- iv- **That this capacity of the state can only be exercised through the commitment of individuals to its goals – through genuine participatory democracy.**

Social liberalism is a doctrine that encompasses both **social awareness** and **social responsibility**. It is not better than other philosophies because it puts forward a more attractive social ideal but because it recognises more fully what is the case. **It is a politics without blindspots.**

Individual or social happiness in the modern world is neither the product of prudential selfishness nor in the gift of the state.

THE PRINCIPLES OF SOCIAL LIBERALISM

The problem for social liberalism is to define the kind of moral bargains, the kind of civil society that enables most people to be happy or perhaps creates the possibility of all people being happy. How does one make or strive to make a social world in which happiness is in principle possible for all?

Such a world can only be forged if we first assume that 'all' are of equal value and here social liberalism differs radically from fascism, racism and all doctrines wedded to prejudiced discrimination. If one accepts that some people by virtue of inherent trait-race, colour, gender etc have a lesser right to happiness then one fundamentally opposes social liberalism. However one also exposes a weakness in one's thinking for to aim for a society in which **all** people can in principle be happy is a broader goal than aiming for a society in which only **some** people will be happy. There at first sight seems no demonstrable reason why those who pursue the lesser, meaner objective – the happiness of the few should oppose the pursuit of greater objective- the happiness of the many.

To argue that the happiness of favoured groups is **necessarily** incompatible or in principle opposed to the happiness of excluded groups is a hard task and seldom attempted with any sincerity.

The practical progress of social liberalism is a hard and demanding task. It involves the setting of rules defining how we may interact – how we must observe each other's privacy, care for our common assets, respect each other's property, private and family life. There is no absolute science for this. Rule making is an enterprise that is not without hazard and often contestable.

Those that contest a rule, who are unwilling unless coerced to observe it, see the rule as an infringement of freedom; those who believe they benefit from a rule see the rule as enhancing their life-as a form of liberation. The man obliged by law to turn down his stereo at night has his freedom to play Wagner at an appropriate volume curbed; his neighbour is now free to get a night's sleep.

The fact that the rule on noise pollution is a democratically agreed rule does not cease to make it contestable – even to social liberals – for the particular rule may not be the best way of securing the happiness of all – the state provision of ear-plugs or better sound insulation could be another option.

There is no optimum number or set of rules for the happy society definable for every age and place. Circumstance does matter. Rules for example on environmental pollution would have accomplished little in a pre- industrial age. **Social Liberalism pursues a clear but nonetheless a moving target.**

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However, it is very insistent on one point which itself is a defining feature of social liberalism. Rules for our own good should not be imposed, they should be willed and understood – in modern parlance ‘owned’.

Social Liberalism contrasts here with forms of theocracy or enlightened dictatorship or state socialism. It begs to differ from these alternative political options – not because they wish for something inferior – but because they do not work. They are attractive or not so attractive illusions- a consequence of incomplete and immature political thought.

For at best they seek the happiness of all but not the understanding or the consent of all. The rules that they set stand in opposition to the wills that they bind. To concur with them results from either blind adherence or begrudging fear.

The rules that bind our society, that establish the framework for our mutual happiness work best when people cannot see them as opposed to their and their families self-interest. The moral bargains between individuals that are reflected in society’s laws are truly effective only when they are truly consensual

THE DILEMMA OF SOCIAL LIBERALISM

Herein though lies the dilemma for social liberalism. Here we are at the crossroads where those wedded to a liberal agenda may be tempted to walk off in different directions. Some instinctively feel that there can be few ethical rules that every member of society can be comfortable with as opposed to coerced into and that therefore society should be permissive, rules few and capacity for ‘self expression’ largely unlimited; others believe that principle of equal respect and equal consent can still be found in a society in which society’s laws and rules provide a more definite steer to people’s behaviour.

Social Liberals endorse the latter view.

There are some social rules which command near universal assent; there are others which can only command majority consent –but social liberals have historically been as content with the latter as with the former. It is a matter of record too that they have agonised long and hard over the potential tyranny of the majority.

They have sought to excuse and limit the infliction of majority will on deviant minorities by use of the spurious distinction between ‘self-regarding’ and ‘non self-regarding’ or social acts. According to Mill, the state may impose a law on unwilling individuals if the majority object to some form of behaviour or demand some form of behaviour and argue that this behaviour in some way effects them or at any rate some of them.

This has proved neither an effective, clear nor easily applicable principle. The use of the ‘principle of liberty’ by lawmakers has been both partial and arbitrary.

All social liberals, however, find common ground in the acceptance that good social rules are rules for the good of all- and that there is a rational case to be put even to a minority

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that oppose them. If there was no such case the disgruntled minority would indeed be tyrannised or to be less emotive simply be ‘coerced.’

Social liberalism works with the premise that ‘coercion’ is in principle avoidable and undesirable. It subscribes to a **principle of rationality** – there must always be a rational case for a law that can be put to those bound by the law. Universal consent if not actual is always desirable and potentially achievable.

Here, however, is the very crux of the matter. There are many who honestly believe that if an unpopular minority pursuit – say -fox-hunting- is to be banned, one must believe that there exists an argument for doing so that ought to persuade even foxhunters. They may think that following the imposition of a ban foxhunters would come round to see the good sense of it.

There are others though who may regard foxhunters as unregenerate brutes and fundamentally unpersuadable. They would regard universal consent as unachievable and the need for coercion and the tyranny of the majority perpetual.

However, there is a fine distinction here between the case where there exists no good argument of any kind that could be plausibly presented to a foxhunter (it is simply not in his interest to have the pursuit banned) and the case where there is a good argument but the foxhunter is unlikely to accept it.

The former case is a genuine and wholly undesirable case of the tyranny of the majority. Rules based on the advantage of the many at the cost of the few. It violates the Liberal principle of equality of respect for persons.

Cases though where the minority are simply unpersuaded about some law but there may be some persuasive arguments that could and possibly should impress them are not clear instances of tyranny at all. Any true Liberal advocating a ban on foxhunting ought to be confident that fair arguments that do not wholly disregard the foxhunters interest can be presented- even if they do not always win over foxhunters. This has to be recognised by Liberals as a fairly high hurdle to get over .It is distinguishable from a general desire or hope that dissident minorities will in time get to share the preferences and predilections of legislators.

Liberals naturally shy away from such nightmare possibilities as Stalinist re-education of recalcitrants. It is not acceptable to turn by any means available a dissident minority into members of the acquiescent majority- seductive though that route has seemed.

That thought again belongs to an age of political immaturity. If there is a solid well-grounded reason for dissent and no genuinely adequate counter arguments there is nothing to prevent new generations of dissenters emerging. Seeking to re-educate or brainwash people out of a position that can be rationally defended is to endlessly chase an elusive phantom no matter what resources one has at one’s disposal.

Ultimately a Social Liberal has no option but to support those proposals and social rules that could in principle command universal assent while recognising that the rugged nature of life is such that universal assent will rarely if ever be actually secured and any proposal open to political argument.

SOCIAL LIBERALISM AND THE DEMOCRATIC PROCESS

The test that Liberal proposals are good and arguments sound is in part the democratic support of rational beings as endorsed over a period of time. It is not a foolproof test. The masses can be wrong in their judgment, elect bad governments and endorse bad policies but they cannot be persistently poor judges of their own happiness. The endorsement of ones policies by the majority is no secure guarantee that they represent the best path to the happiness of all but a disbelief in the capacity of ones policies to command the assent of fellow rational beings is indeed damning. Not only does it throw doubt on whether those policies genuinely do lead to the happiness of all but also it implicitly acknowledges that such policies cannot ever be a matter of lasting, consensual agreement. There seems no reason why good policy (policy aimed at the good of all) should not lay itself open to democratic test since it is not inconceivable that it will be endorsed and not likely that it will work without such endorsement.

The Platonic concept of a savvy political elite determining an enlightened policy designed to maximise everyone's chances of happiness fails not only because the elite cannot be kept enlightened and altruistic but because even those who benefit from their enlightened decision making must necessarily be either duped or coerced into consent. Otherwise why not involve them? A duped or coerced consent is an unsatisfactory basis for either individual or social happiness.

Sound, functioning democracy is simply the best means of ensuring that the 'good of all' remains a goal of public policy.

The enthusiasm within Social Liberalism for the 'democratic testing of policy' – and the instinct to have policy 'owned' and realised through the willing consent of citizens generates certain key Liberal values and aims

- **the belief in open and rational discussion**
- **the desire to see that embodied in public and political debate**
- **the fundamental value of truth (what Václav Havel called 'living in the truth')**
- **the need to review the workings of democracy to embody these values and ensure that elections and referenda represent a fair assessment of policy and social direction**
- **the obligation to confront the citizen with the true nature of the choices he makes – to encourage social responsibility and ownership not only in those who promote policy but also in those who endorse it, who vote on it – and even amongst those- the media – who comment on it, who reflect and advocate it**

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Social Liberalism is not only politics without blindspots – it is politics without excuses, radical, transparent, challenging, choice-setting.

Social Liberalism does not have a perfect solution for every problem but it does have a way of ensuring that credible solutions are found, that problems are defined and faced.

Social Liberalism is not unique in its support for democracy- it is unique in what it attempts to use democracy for and in its drive to make democracy ‘real’. Conservatives use democratic structures to maintain an uneasy truce between the powerful factions that make up society. Socialists use democratic structures to socially engineer a better world. Liberals use democracy to make articulate and engaged the mind of society.

Liberalism is neither populism nor populist- for populism consists in merely taking up the chants in the streets and unthinkingly echoing them. Social **Liberalism is the attempt to give shape, coherence and living form to the concerns and the pre-occupations of all citizens to the ultimate disadvantage of none.**

Unlike populism, it is a dangerous and hazardous pursuit but as Joe Grimmond told Liberals some little while ago – ‘ we must walk towards the sound of gunfire’.