



Liberty

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Can a single word have poetic power? Perhaps not but the single noun Liberty seems to me to distil most of what is important about civil or national entities. Standing alone it is near to poetic beauty. Freedom ought to have a similar resonance but it has been bleached of meaning and often co-opted by freedom's enemies. Democracy is another word that is exhausted by over use. And it has other problems.

Liberty means the rule of law — the opposite of rule by men. Liberty lifts argument above the virtues of any sovereign, king or assembly. A good or kindly prince is of little value unless he creates liberty. If we live by the canons of the rule of law then, in Friedrich Hayek's phrase, "the rules are impartial, predictable and capable of generalisation". Perhaps Professor Hayek's most magisterial book is his "Constitution of Liberty". It offers an inventory of what constitutes liberty — the absence of arbitrary coercion. If people have Liberty they are free to create contracts. It is the freedom of contract, an adjunct of Liberty, that allows us to create the mysterious but numinous process we call markets. I do not think we have begun to understand all that emerges under a system of Liberty. We are still discovering.

The condition of nations varies widely. The disparities are even getting wider. Yet we can observe which communities are failing and which are prospering. Those without Liberty — and the two caryatids law and markets — can be seen to be in a state of misery. We can see what Liberia and Iraq lack. We can see beyond any doubt at all which corners of humanity prosper.

Who denies it is the pluralistic liberal West? This includes little specs of liberty in zones of tyranny. I always think Singapore and Hong Kong are beacons to the rest of Asia.

Switzerland stands out from the rest of the nations of Continental Europe as it has chosen to exempt itself from the curious juggernaut bureaucracy of the European Union. Oskar Lange, the noted Socialist economist, once joked that when Communism had triumphed Switzerland would still have to be capitalist so we could know the price of everything. It is remarkable how much truth there can be in one light remark. Soon it will be vital for the rest of us to have Switzerland immune from the flurry of directives from the Commission in Brussels so that we may know how life should really be run.

There are those who want to steal Liberty in favour of expropriation and redistribution, "Liberty from Want" or "Liberty from Poverty". These are bogus uses of the beloved word. Liberty is defined as the right to pursue your own ends and live life by your own priorities in a responsible manner — not to take from others.

For a Briton American usage can at times be irritating. The Liberty Bell in Philadelphia or the Statue of Liberty in New York are meant to commemorate the renunciation of British oppression. We regard that as a romantic illusion. The English colonies under George III had the rule of law and freedom of trade with the preposterous exception that their maritime trade could only be carried in English ships. I am half jesting, half serious.

The USA serves as a sort of Liberty ship for the rest of the human race. For the first time since our species wandered out of Africa we are coming together again to blend into a great melting pot of shared DNA. The Americans are emerging as a new civilisation - but defined as a capita- list one, one born of Liberty.

I regard the little constellation of liberal think tanks spawned by the Institute of Economic Affairs as one of the great sources of the oxygen that preserves Liberty. The great Irish liberal thinker Edmund Burke warned against the seeking of perfection: "Abstract Liberty, like other mere abstractions, can never be found". We stumble towards refining the rules of Liberty but we can observe where it has flourished and where it has never been permitted to flower.

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