

ASSESS THE VIEW THAT LIBERALISM HAS TRIUMPHED AS THE DOMINANT IDEOLOGY IN CONTEMPORARY BRITISH POLITICS

When establishing whether liberalism is the dominant ideology in contemporary British politics, we must first establish the meaning of the key terms; liberalism, ideology and contemporary. The Oxford English Dictionary defines contemporary as, “living or occurring in the same or present modern period”. This basically means present day. When defining ideology we must understand that there are a variety of ways in which it could be interpreted. In a political context ideology is; a perspective of the world in which there are a set of values and a plan of action as to how to achieve this and a view of the future of an ideal society. This therefore means, in the context of the question the modern, present day ideology.

As I stated before, we must establish what liberalism means. There are two types of liberalism; classic and modern. It could be argued that as one of the major political ideologies in British politics today, liberalism is distinguished between by the importance it attaches to the civil and political rights of individuals as described by Hobhouse. Liberals demand a sustainable realm of personal freedom – including freedom of conscience, speech, association, occupation, and, more recently, sexuality – which the state should not intrude upon, except to protect us from harm. Classic liberalism consists of economic freedom, laissez-faire, individualism and personal freedom. Modern or progressive liberalism is more towards state intervention as long as it is beneficial to us as people, equality of opportunity and reason.

Liberalism first emerged as an important movement in Europe in the sixteenth century. Today, particularly after the decline of communism, it is the dominant ideology in many parts of the world including the United Kingdom. A true liberal state does not seek to resolve conflicts, but rather provides a neutral framework within which citizens can pursue their diverse conceptions of the good life. Liberalism, on this view is the only humane response to the inevitable pluralism and diversity of modern societies.

Some liberal critics would argue that liberalism has not triumphed of anything rather had evolved itself. It could be argued that liberalism began to emerge as the ideological justification for the rise of capitalism, and that its image of an autonomous individual is simply a glorification for the pursuit of self-interest in the market – a propaganda conspiracy. It has always been noted that liberalism is historically linked very closely to capitalism. It could also be argued that that liberalism is a meta-ideology with a set of ideas and beliefs which all the other parties works within.

The Liberal Democrats are the most liberals (with a small l) than all the other parties in British politics. It has always been thought that they occupy the centre ground in the political spectrum so other parties such as the Conservatives, on the right and Labour, on the left can “borrow” the liberal issues that are most likely to win the party votes. This means that hints of liberalism as an ideology will be flowing throughout every party manifesto thus being the most dominant ideology. But it can also be argued that the Liberal Party, the party with the truest essence of liberalism is not doing very well politically. The Liberal Democrats are still the third party that cannot influence the people, the voters to vote for them. This could be a bit cynical, as I have not mentioned the fact that the electoral system disadvantages them greatly. Also due to increased use of spin-doctors and special advisers it could be argued that politics is no longer about ideology. As Rory Bremner from the BBC stated on Breakfast with Frost, “*politics is all about image and no longer about ideology*”. This means that in modern politics it is not the fact that the Labour Party is dominant rather Tony Blair is the best leader out of all the parties. It seems like the Liberal Party has lost its distinctive policy which made it so popular in 1900s.

After World War II, post war consensus was the new political concept. This concept was that all the parties are getting much narrower thus meaning there will be a blurring of

policies and ideologies. In 1942, whilst the Liberal Party was suffering its worst electoral campaign in its history, William Beveridge, a liberal civil servant, set out a blue print for the modern welfare state. It was based on the idea that liberty was less threatened by laws and governments than by social evils such as poverty, unemployment, ill health and poor living conditions. It followed from this that state action to reduce such evils would provide greater freedom. Beveridge proposed that the state had a responsibility to look after all of its citizens. The practical thoughts of Beveridge's liberal thinking resulting in the modern welfare state, free education, and national health service. This is clearly one of the greatest triumphs of liberalism as an ideology, possibly the greatest triumph from any ideology. No one thing has influenced our life's as much the welfare state to in context of the question, in this view it is easy to see that liberalism is an ideology that has triumphed.

As I stated before, we have seen another parties "borrowing" liberal concepts. An example of this Margaret Thatcher "borrowing" classic liberal ideas and revamping them in the form of Neo-liberalism or Thatcherism. We must view Thatcherism as an ideology differently to Thatcherism as reality because in reality only a few proportion of its core concepts were ever achieved. Margaret Thatcher and her special adviser, Sir Keith Joseph were heavily influenced by neo-liberal thinkers such as Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman. Thatcher set about using her dominance to convert their fellow conservatives to their beliefs. Their goal was to roll back the frontiers of the state. This involved reducing public expenditure and taxation, a very liberal concept. It also included removing state control over industry and restoring the operation of free markets wherever possible. At the same time, what was seen as the undesirable influence of trade unions was to be destroyed. It is these beliefs that are referred to neo-liberalism. Thatcher however was called on more than one occasion by her cabinet a, "liberal economist" with her laissez faire attitude to businesses. It is this view that it can be argued that liberals is the most dominant ideology because Thatcher was in government for 11 years which meant that "her" ideas and policies must have been working.

Around the same time, much of the liberalism of Hobhouse, Green, Lloyd George was being absorbed into the new successful Labour Party. As the Labour party became more centre-ground, it pushed the Liberal Party out towards the left. Tony Blair's new mix of democratic socialism and libertarianism and capitalism, formally called the Third Way, was a success. The expression "Third Way" implies that there has been a First way and Second Way. The first way is traditional socialism, the true Labour ideology. It proposed collectivist solutions to most social and economic problems – state ownership of major industries such as railway or gas, an extensive welfare state, strong links with trade unions and high levels of taxation. This seems like it needed to be changed because the Labour party had been out of power for eighteen years. The second way is Thatcher's way as I have described earlier. This proposed free market capitalism, pursuit of individual self-interest and low levels of taxation. In many ways, the first and second ways are totally opposite to each other. Finally the new third ways combines some Thatcherite policies such as free market capitalism with socialist policies such as extensive welfare state. As soon as the Third Way came to the forefront of our political agenda, it was elected into power. This shows how dominant liberalism really is as an ideology because since they adopted liberal concepts, they were elected.

To conclude it could be argued that liberalism has triumphed as the dominant ideology because some of the major parties want to use those policies. It must be stressed that liberalism itself has been a highly successful movement challenging conservatism and socialism with great effect. It is only the Liberal Party that has declined. In short, most of the liberal clothes have been stolen by others and are still being worn by them. Despite disagreements about its philosophical foundations, the basic language of liberalism – individual rights, liberty, equality of opportunity – has become the dominant language of public discourse in British contemporary politics.

