

Liberalism has a dual commitment both to individual freedom and equality. How does liberalism try to reconcile these two commitments? Does it succeed? Can freedom and equality really co-exist?

The ideas of liberalism have been around for more than three hundred years<sup>1</sup> and inevitably these ideas have changed over time. These changes led to the development of two strands of liberalism, which are referred to as 'classical liberalism' and 'modern liberalism'. It is important to distinguish between the two strands as these liberal traditions clash over their views on certain aspects of society, particularly on the role of the state. From a classical liberal perspective the state should play a minimal role in society, this idea is exemplified by the New right. From a modern liberal view point the state should play an active role in society, for example the welfare state. Many key political ideas were derived from liberalism, both classical and modern. The work of the classical liberal Adam Smith on protections in international and national trade could be clearly seen in Margaret Thatcher's economic policies and ideas on the free market. Her ideas on the role that the state should play in society also followed a classical liberalist approach. Due to the emergence of the two strands the ideology of liberalism was now subject to inherent contradictory beliefs.

Almost all supporters of liberalism argue the supremacy of the individual and believe that every one's greatest concern should be their individual happiness. Liberalism promises all individuals equal rights and freedoms regardless of their economic or social status. Freedom is defined as being able to act at will and not under restraint. The word freedom has been connected with independence, flexibility and free rein. Equality is achieved in society when all individuals are of the same merit. To achieve equality is to reach a state of sameness, balance and fairness.<sup>2</sup> Liberalism commits itself to both individual freedom and to equality. A big problem with this is that a classical liberal would hold a different idea about what individual freedom and equality should entail, in comparison with a modern liberal. "Many of the disagreements within liberal ideology can be traced back to these rival ideas of uniqueness and equality<sup>3</sup>".

According to classical liberals freedom is the absence of restrictions. Extreme theorists would not agree with any form of

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<sup>1</sup> It was not until the early part of the 19th century that Liberalism was seen as a political ideology. It was first used in Spain in 1812 and by the 1840s the term was widely recognised throughout Europe.

<sup>2</sup> Collins and Gem. Dictionary and Thesaurus, ('Freedom' and 'Equality')

<sup>3</sup> Political Ideologies: An Introduction. Author: Andrew Heywood. (Chapter 2, Page 29)

restriction which infringes on an individual's freedom. For example they are against restrictions on speeding, self harm and the use of addictive drugs. Classical liberals explain that with this freedom comes a large responsibility. Although individuals would have complete control over their body and mind they would also have to fully comprehend that every individual has an equal right to this liberty. This idea on freedom and equality has often been branded the 'negative' theory of liberty. It is the modern liberal theory which has been referred to as the 'positive' theory of liberty and it is this theory which has more relevance to contemporary British society.

Modern liberals believe that it is the presence of restrictions which enables individuals to reach their full potential and prosper. This is because situations would constantly arise where one individual's freedom would conflict with another. If only one of the clashing freedoms is pursued then the other individuals' freedom would be greatly restricted. This would cause a severe inequality. If one man wants to kill another man, it is impossible for both men to have absolute freedom of choice. Under this example the two cannot co-exist, one must give way to the other. It is this which led modern liberals to the conclusion that, the very existence of freedoms leads to a necessity for restrictions. If equal restrictions are placed on each and every individual then perhaps it becomes possible for freedom and equality to co-exist.

Individual freedom itself provides a commitment to equality. The belief that all individuals are born equal is embedded in a set of basic and irrefutable human rights. All liberals unite in the belief that individuals should not be disadvantaged in society on the grounds of gender, class or ethnicity and that every individual should be granted equal legal and political equality.

It is clear that liberals believe that every individual must have an equal opportunity to achieve success. However, it's important to understand that liberal thinkers do not necessarily believe that all individuals should have an equal result in terms of their success. Liberals acknowledge that individuals are all different from one another and therefore possess different talents, skills and work ethics. This idea that individuals should have an equal opportunity to develop their unequal abilities holds strong ties to the theory of meritocracy. This is the idea that the most able and most hard working people will succeed the most in life, regardless of social factors.

Classical liberals believe that meritocracy works and can be applied to all aspects of life for any member of society, regardless of class. John Locke was a pioneer of such ideas in the seventeenth century. In opposition, the modern liberal Robert Nozick has argued that when capitalism replaced feudalism all individuals had equal opportunity and

still certain individuals came to be in a better position than others. Classical liberals have come under heavy criticism for idealising society and neglecting the class inequalities within it. The idea that if you work hard you will do well has a huge implications and it had caused Marxist thinkers to suggest that liberal ideas only reflect the interests of the bourgeoisie in a capitalist society. Modern liberals claim that before all individuals can become truly equal a redistribution of wealth must occur. John Rawls, in “A theory of justice”, claims that those on the bottom end of the economic system must have an equal opportunity to achieve success as those on the top end of the system before the theory of meritocracy should be applied and that social inequality should exist only if it works to the benefit of the poorest members of society. In contrast to classical liberals, modern liberal thinkers believe capitalism only worsened class inequalities within society. These different ideas on how social equality relates to individual freedom and equality causes yet another rift between the two strands of liberalism.

Closely linked to the ideas of social equality is the emergence of social states. The twentieth century saw a dramatic increase of state intervention. A great deal of this intervention took the form of social welfare. “Within liberalism the case for social welfare is made by modern liberals, in marked contrast to classical liberals, who extol the virtues of self-help and individual responsibility”.<sup>4</sup> Modern liberals defend the welfare state and see it as a step in the direction of equality of opportunity. They believe that it is the role of the state to correct social disadvantages and claim that the welfare state extends an individuals’ equality and does not hinder any member of society. Classical liberals see the welfare state as an agent which reduces individual freedom and places limits on equality. A classical liberal would describe the welfare state as a tool to transfer the money of the ‘hard working or more talented’ richer members of society to the poorer ‘lazy or unskilled’ members. The role of the state is a subject which greatly divides the classical and modern liberals and shows strong evidence of both conservative and socialist points of view.

A huge obstacle on the narrow path to deciding whether individual freedom and equality can really co-exist is the presence of both conservative and socialist ideas which both help lay the foundation of liberalism. This mixture of ideologies within liberalism has led commentators to argue that it is best described as a “general attitude and not a distinct set of political beliefs<sup>5</sup>”.

Perhaps the most accepted answer in modern society is that individual freedom and equality do co-exist to an extent. However, many would

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<sup>4</sup> Political Ideologies: An Introduction. Author: Andrew Heywood (Chapter 2, Page 60)

<sup>5</sup> Ideologies and Political Theory, a conceptual approach. Author Michael Freedon, (pg 141).

argue that it is impossible to achieve individual freedom and equality unless all wealth including property was redistributed first. Others would disagree claiming that the cream would always rise to the top and even after wealth had been redistributed and freedom and equality co-existed successfully an elite would once again come to be in a better position due to the theory of meritocracy.

There is no doubt that liberalism does make an effort to fulfil its commitment to both individual freedom and equality. However, liberalism itself is particularly diverse and depending on the position one takes on the ideological spectrum, it can be seen to succeed or not succeed in fulfilling the dual commitments. Possibly, it is best to see individual freedom and equality co-existing as much as they can and at certain times maybe one has more influence over the other, interchangeably.

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