Liberalism:

A Political Philosophy

Ronald Chau

26 November 2009

Introduction

Liberalism is a highly contested term that consists of many competing theories of the way society should be. Associate Professor Greg Melleuish shed light on this topic at the Liberty and Society Conference on 12 September 2009. Melleuish began by outlining the basics of liberalism in relation to its core principles of individualism and liberty. Following from these principles were four key elements of liberalism: individualism, egalitarianism, universalism and meliorism. The presentation was made in such a way so as to give the classical liberal point of view of liberalism. The implications of such a view were covered in detail with the central theme that government should not interfere with the lives of private citizens, except in certain special cases, being prevalent throughout. Finally, the lecturer discussed liberalism in relation to conservatism in different contexts and put forward suggestions to increase freedom in a negative sense in Australia. This report aims to provide a brief overview of the presentation and its analysis of liberalism as a political philosophy.

What is Liberalism?

Liberalism as a political and moral philosophy is centred on two main principles - these are individualism and liberty. Firstly, liberalism places the individual at the heart of society and argues that the highest value social order is one that is built around the individual. Secondly, the purpose of society is to allow individuals to reach their full potential if they want to, and that the best way to do this is to give the individual as much liberty as possible. These two key principles are the foundations upon which the various elements of liberalism spring forth.

John Gray identified four essential elements of liberalism. These were individualism, egalitarianism, universalism and meliorism.

Individualism

Individualism values individuality and as such it entails a number of beliefs. One belief forwarded by John Locke was that individuals have rights simply because they are human and that these

rights are above the discretion of the state and exist pre-politically. A classical liberal would view these rights in a formal or legal way. That is, rights should be negative in the sense that the state should not impinge on those rights, and not positive in the sense that government should provide something (e.g. welfare). However, these rights are subject to the harm principle which argues that individuals should be allowed to do whatever they want as long as they do not harm anyone else. The definition of harm is controversial, but as a theoretical principle it implies there is a legitimate role for the state to protect individuals from each other. Another belief is that individuals are self-interested and are the only ones who know best what their interests are. It follows that individuals should be left alone in their decisions to maximise utility and that any government imposed decision would only make the individual worse off. Underlying the previous belief is the assumption that individuals are rational and capable of deciding what is in their best interests - they do not need, and even find it undesirable, for the government to decide for them.

Egalitarianism, Universalism and Meliorism

While individualism is probably the most important element, egalitarianism, universalism and meliorism are also critical components of liberalism. Egalitarianism, in the sense promoted by classical liberals, means equal opportunity. It does not mean equality in a positive way, whereby there would be a redistribution of wealth. But rather, it entails legal and political equality. Melleuish gave a good analogy where egalitarianism meant that there should be no impediments to individuals as they run the race of life, but not that they should all cross the finishing line together. Universalism implies that the moral principles that follow liberalism apply to all human beings, no matter what culture they are in. Meliorism is the belief that human beings have the capacity to become better just as their social and political institutions can become better.

Implications

There are some important implications that liberalism has for society. Since individuals can only truly be individuals when they make their own decisions, there is a requirement for the government to take a laissez-faire approach to society (which is made up of individuals). Individuals are not to be controlled; not for the state's benefit, and not even for their own

'benefit'. Remember, however, that classical liberals argue that any kind of state interference other than that pertaining to upholding the harm principle will harm the individual - no benefit is possible. Such a belief does not mean that there will be continuous conflict. Classical liberals believe that individuals can *voluntarily* come together and form peaceful associations. Melleuish stressed that liberty should not be confused with competition or Social Darwinism, but that it involves the freedom of people to cooperate.

Another implication is that the government should not force people to reach their potential as any such attempt by government would probably hinder overall potential. For example, the redistribution of goods to help the poor reach their potential requires taxes, and these impose restrictions on the already successful to further their potential even more. Although liberty is the best way for individuals to reach their potential, it should also be acknowledged that liberty has value in itself - so if people want to be hermits they should be allowed to do so. Furthermore, this laissez-faire approach applies to individuals as well - individuals should not force their beliefs on other individuals. An individual that is forced but not convinced is still of the same mind and any such action following would be the result of fear and not conviction - it would be morally wrong.

In addition to the harm principle, there is the 'free-rider' problem whereby individuals benefit from the good works of others and through no effort of their own. Hence, there is another possible justification for state intervention to prevent such free-riding. Liberalism is not only morally good, but it provides society with the most material wealth as a by-product of individuals reaching their full potential. Finally, another area where government intervention may be legitimate is in the case of individuals who are not able to exercise judgement and make their own choices. For instance, drug addicts do not have the capacity for self-determination and thus require the government to help them achieve that capacity. Therefore, liberalism can shape society in many different ways, but always in the advancement of individual freedom.

Liberalism and Conservatism

Melleuish went on to discuss the relation between liberalism and conservatism and how Australia can improve liberalism and conservatism in a classical sense. Across the world there are two versions of liberalism. The first believes that the state should intervene with the lives of ordinary

people as much as possible - this has been the orthodox liberal view. The second view is one held by classical liberals and it promotes negative freedom as the morally right kind of freedom. In Australia, the latter view is labelled as conservatism, but this is a confused term as it could also stand for greater state intervention as it does in the British context. The Howard government followed the British interpretation of conservatism and this led to greater centralisation of power with the Commonwealth government. On the other hand, Americans consider conservatism to mean classical liberalism. Australia has both forms of conservatism because it has both forms of liberalism. But the statist version of conservatism is currently the dominant one in Australia.

Melleuish offered two ways to make Australian conservatism closer to the American kind. Firstly, solving Commonwealth-state relations does not require the accruing of more power to the Commonwealth as has been the case so far, but rather more power should be given to the states. The states should be made more financially responsible and this can be achieved by returning taxation powers, particularly income taxation, back to the states. Secondly, power should be shifted to local governments so that individuals can take greater responsibility for their local institutions. Hence, the statist versions of liberalism and conservatism have ruled in Australian politics and the best way to reverse this is to decentralise power by taking more of it away from the Commonwealth and giving it to the states and local governments.

Conclusion

Clearly liberalism is a multi-faceted ideology with wide-ranging implications for society. It has individualism and liberty as two central principles guiding various forms of liberalism. Even though some elements of liberalism are the subject of debate among those that call themselves 'liberals', there are four key elements that most liberals agree on - individualism, egalitarianism, universalism and meliorism. Melleuish interpreted these principles and elements in a classical liberal way and as such painted a picture of society that favoured negative freedom. Such a society would have government take a laissez-faire approach to individuals and would only intervene to uphold the harm principle, prevent free-riders and to help make decisions for those incapable of making decisions for themselves. This type of liberalism is equivalent to the type of conservatism that exists in America but currently the British form of conservatism, which advocates greater state intervention, is dominant in Australia. Our society can become freer if it rewinds the

administrative centralism that has occurred since 1901 and transfers more power to the state and local governments. Ergo, Melleuish's introduction to liberalism was helpful in understanding what it is and what impact it has had and should have on our society.