

TO DOUG EVERINGHAMPublished
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Lack of an agreed lexicon makes political debate difficult.

Some time ago I wrote a piece regretting that political terms like "right" and "left" have little meaning. I questioned the rational basis of much that passes for political difference of opinion and the meaning of those favourite pejoratives- left, right, laissez faire, conservative and socialist.

Doug Everingham, MHR for Capricornia, responded to my musings with the criticism that liberalism without a "concept" that places "universal ethical or spiritual standards of tolerance, public admission of faults, public admission of our adversaries' virtues and reverence for all (human) life above economic growth.....is a mirror image of the statism it opposes, whether communist, capitalist or Feudal."

Well Doug: I don't know that that form of "liberalism" is a mirror image of statism, but a philosophy which does not respect the standards you describe should not be called 'liberal' - our difficulty is the meaning of words.

Economic growth is not an end in itself but it is the only means by which people's material wants can be satisfied. It is the only way half the world can escape the threat of starvation. As for the rest of us: economic growth will make our lives longer and more comfortable. It is economic growth that let us escape the economic drudgery that was our grandparents' lot and will let our children escape even more drudgery. It has given us time away from the task of keeping body and soul in the one place to devote to intellectual, spiritual and recreational pursuits.

Economic growth has improved the lives of the wealthy by widening the range of their luxuries (their toys), and by greatly reducing those causes of illness and death that were no respecters of person. But growth has done far more for the poor; it has given them changes of clothing, clean food and drink, decent housing, transport, entertainment and has all but eliminated tuberculosis, typhoid, amoebic dysentery and starvation. With economic growth has come a society with few conspicuous wealth differences. Economic growth alone will enable us to go on improving the lives of those who have least. An egalitarian like you, Doug, shouldn't knock it, even by implication.

An economically stagnant society is not a tolerant society. Doug, you know as well as I do how unlikely trade unionists are to demand lower wages to leave a little more for the disabled or for pensions; how unlikely pensioners are to insist that some of their pensions are transferred to migrant education, or farmers are to give their super bounty to BHP. Sadly, those sorts of things don't happen. It is relatively easy to meet new wants out of new growth; very hard to take away wealth that people have become accustomed to. It may not say much for human nature, but we are more likely to admit others' virtues and our own faults when we don't feel threatened.

You say that I, like most capitalists, confuse economic freedom with freedom of the human spirit. If by the human spirit you mean that fire that makes each guard his individuality in the face of adversity, then neither I nor most capitalists are confusing that with economic freedom. We rejoiced, as you rejoiced, that Solzhenitsyn was able to demonstrate that the finest human spirits could rise above the worst that governments could do, but we did not insist that he had struck a blow for economic freedom.

The economic freedoms are the right to buy, to sell, to own property and to contract. On the other hand, by "freedom of the human spirit" do you mean all of the other well known freedoms -- freedom of thought, speech, worship, assembly, movement and person? These too are very dear to my liberal prejudices. None need be subservient to another, nor need any be prejudiced by the economic freedoms; each is important in its own right. In fact each is protected by respect for the others, including the economic freedoms.

A free economy maximises growth. Implicitly you concede this by arguing that it places growth above the spiritual freedoms. But what really is the relevance of economic freedom to other freedom?

In pure theory, a complex system of laws could allocate Australia's workers to each of unknown millions of activities and could allocate what they produce to each of six million households. But no legal system could possibly understand every person's

aptitudes and wishes, or understand the requirements of every productive process. We really have no option but substantially to rely on individuals exercising free judgement in their own self interest in markets with possibly a little "help" from the government. Left to themselves, people will buy, sell, amass assets and contract. Even in their own judgement, they will sometimes get it wrong. Governments also sometimes get it wrong. A government that surmounts the threshold question of what is right, can then ask how it can 'help'. It must also ask --is the lost freedom worth it ?

It is not only the economic freedoms that are lost once governments step in.

A controlled economy requires a police state - people will not do what they don't wish to do unless the state has some form of sanction. Our courts are already busy with economic crimes - selling eggs, wheat, milk to other than the relevant board - employing below the legal wage - selling cheap air tickets - selling one's own skills without a ticket - trading out of hours - smuggling. The courts are authorised to take away the personal freedom of those who illegally claim economic freedom.

Inspectors, with greater powers than policemen, invade privacy to count hens and check books. Airline agreements reduce freedom of movement. When governments tax families who prefer religious education, to finance secular education, thought is less than completely free of government domination. Minimum wage laws deny hundreds of thousands the freedom to work and hence to enjoy the fruits of work.

In South Africa you chose a poor example of a laissez faire economy; in fact it is so statist, interventionist, or socialist, call it what you will, that it has first and second class labour markets. Unfortunately we don't have a word that says exactly what South Africa is , but clearly it does not enjoy economic freedom.