

Dr Ben O'Neill

By Ryan Kirke

The 2013 Mises Seminar was an eye opening but extremely valuable experience. It included a vast range of knowledgeable speakers covering topical subjects such as Bitcoin and whistleblowing. As a UWA student, much of the focus of my economics education has been based on Keynesian thinking. As a result of this, it was very interesting to listen to speakers cover the Austrian school of thought. However, for me, it was some of the more fringe subjects of the libertarian movement, in particular the issue of privacy and whistleblowing that I found most engaging.

During this year's seminar, Dr Ben O'Neill gave two excellent speeches on whistleblowing and police discrimination. Ben is currently a lecturer in statistics at the University of New South Wales (ADFA). He has also practiced as a lawyer and has worked as a political advisor in Canberra. I was fortunate enough to spend some time with Dr O'Neill after the conference where I witnessed his immense passion for the Libertarian movement.

Whistleblowing as an act has been occurring for hundreds of years. However, in the past few years the internet and social media have changed the game. Governments, in particular the USA Government, have been collecting and storing vast amounts of information on everybody, even their own citizens. Now ordinary young men and women, like Edward Snowden, are able to leak vast amounts of information pertaining to governments breaking the law on a national and international scale.

Dr O'Neill's speech looked at this issue of privacy and whistleblowing from four key angles. Firstly, he discussed the individual's right to privacy, which he connected with two main factors; property rights and non-aggression. Using these factors and the Libertarian belief that privacy is an important cultural value, Ben discussed the major sources of government invasion of privacy. He showed that government monitoring without consent and with no crime justifying this examination, may constitute an aggression against those being monitored. Secondly, Dr O'Neill discussed the ethics of whistleblowing. He clearly showed that while whistleblowers such as Edward Snowden may be breaking their contractual obligations, if the government has been breaking the law then the contracts themselves are not valid. As a result, if a whistleblower discloses evidence of unlawful actions, they are not breaking the law, even if this evidence is confidential. However, in the USA there are currently legislative restrictions that still allow people such as Edward Snowden to be prosecuted unfairly.

On the topic of government ownership of information Dr O'Neill provided a very short but effective metaphor. Usually when a person or government commits a crime they attempt to distance themselves from the crime, for example a murderer claiming "that's not my knife". Instead, after the Snowden leaks we have seen the USA government claim "how dare you take my blood-soaked knife".

In concluding his speech, Dr O'Neill provided a glimpse at what a libertarian solution would look like. He found three key changes: surveillance would need to be targeted rather than indiscriminate; penalties

would be needed for agencies breaching assurances of confidentiality; and investigation agencies would want to operate based on “probable cause” to avoid losses.

Dr O'Niell's speech gave an interesting insight into an issue that has become very topical after some major leaks from Edward Snowden and Wikileaks in the last few years. He clearly showed that the USA's means are not justified by their mantra of international security. Overall, the two days of speeches and socialising provided me with a deep and useful insight into the Libertarian movement.