

12 steps to freedom

A talk for Mannkal, 9 April 2010

A brief introduction about us

Thought Broker emerged from Shaken and Stirred, an event series created to overcome ideological isolationism and bring people from across the spectrum together for raucous debate in a relaxed environment. With no agenda other than to encourage lively and interesting discussion, the events thrive on dissent and a fair swig of red wine.

Shaken and Stirred is deeply opposed to popularity politics and we see ourselves as the antithesis of activist organisations, in that we encourage debate rather than presenting opinion “canapes”. If we identify with any cause, it’s libertarianism. But like good liberterians, we don’t insist that people agree with us. We believe that good ideas are measured on their outcomes, not on their popularity, and that creativity demands we look beyond our ideological boundaries and challenge our own sacred cows.

Shaken and Stirred aims to restore the discussion of ideas to a pleasurable pastime for anyone at any time. Thought Broker takes those ideas and widens their audience. It’s important to us that arguments never be personal, always respectful, sometimes passionate, and most importantly fun.

We’ve also published a collection responses to our event talks in a magazine called ‘Binge Thinking’ which has been well received. And our next project is to revive discussion around libertarianism in Australia by bringing the libertarian love-in ‘FreedomFest’ to Sydney in March next year.

We’re going to take you through a talk in four parts with the occasional whimsical illustration, because someone foolishly mentioned to us there was a PowerPoint option.

Over the course of the next half hour, we’ll discuss:

- What we mean by free.
- Why libertarianism isn’t more popular in Australia.
- Whether libertarianism is still relevant.
- And how the individual can flourish.

What does it mean to be free?

The only freedom which deserves the name is that of pursuing our own good, in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs, or impede their efforts to obtain it.

I’m not going to take you through a tortured discussion of what it means to be free. The question of is subjective and far from settled. However we should note that our definition of freedom is the austere, non-prescriptive definition from Mill which in no way includes the freedoms some groups would like vouchsafed, e.g. freedom from hunger.

Why isn't libertarianism more popular in Australia?

Libertarianism is the default way of being for young people moving into adulthood, gaining their individuality and political awareness. Yet, libertarianism in this country is supported mainly by middle-aged men.

We suggest that there are two main reasons why libertarianism is not 'cool' in Australia.

Firstly, following the leftist march through the institutions, libertarianism is not visible on campuses nor influential in student politics. This means that for many young people who are politically interested the only outlet is to become involved in the traditional partisan groups – Young Labor, Young Libs and The Greens (not the mention the 'Socialist Alliance').

The second reason is that Australian libertarianism has inherited the American fusion between libertarians and conservatives. This means that some young people who are turned off by conservative social values incorrectly associate libertarianism with conservatism.

We don't buy the line that Australian's are too laid back and comfortable to be bothered with political engagement. If Australians were too relaxed to bother with politics or changing their society then where did all the regulations come from? The same goes for university students. While you could question the motives of some student politicians, as a group they are certainly not disaffected.

But there are a couple of issues to be dealt with before libertarianism can be made cool again, for example the problems of libertarian ethics. If we're able to resolve some of these issues, we believe that the current climate presents an opportunity to reposition libertarianism in Australian politics, particularly among the young.

Sticking it to the man

Young people are often joyously self-righteous and delight in taking, or at least talking about, the moral high ground. They're quickly whipped into irrelevant fury which we most often see channeled into anti-capitalist, anti-globalisation protests and other redundant kneejerk exercises in feeling edgy and morally superior. Sticking it to the man.

What I can't put my finger on is how the government somehow escaped being 'the man'. Instead, free exchange between individuals and prosperity came to be scapegoated as 'the man'. Libertarians must restore the title of 'the man' to government and encourage the young to stick it to him as soon as possible. Libertarianism has the potential to fill the void among the self-righteous with its Crowley-style application of the "do what you will as long as you do no harm to others" rule.

If you love something, set it free

It may not suit some of us, but the most direct route to popularising libertarianism, is to surrender 'ownership' of it.

There is a growing tendency for social conservatives to align themselves with libertarians when in fact their point of agreement is financial only. (How many of you here today are for free markets? How many for free trade? How many for the free movement of peoples? What about free love? – And you still consider yourselves libertarians!?) As a consequence, libertarianism is no longer associated with freedoms – it is now popularly considered a right-wing cause.

There is no harm in celebrating shared values, like free markets. It's nice to have other intelligent groups supporting the things we value. But it's worth remembering that there is a relatively high level of social control implied in a conservative end-point. Libertarians and small government conservatives can walk together – but we're going different places.

In the United States, the current Tea Party gatherings are an extreme example of the political right hijacking a form of protest associated with the desire to escape government coercion. They're harnessing a weight of causes to it from which libertarianism worldwide will not escape unscathed.

Free market proponents do not naturally share a path with immigration protectionists, though they often seem to share a protest pod in the States. I find it bizarre that the same group of protesters that will wave signs saying 'I am John Galt' will also complain about the threat from immigrant workers. Lefties aren't the only ones capable of double-think.

Whether from the Left or the Right, it's false comfort to say these people are swelling our number. They may look and sound like us right now but their outcomes are very different – once they've helped us free ourselves of this nasty bugbear of the kulaks/socialists/universal healthcare, they have a Utopia in mind; a prescriptive plan for how the world should look.

Your self interest does not match mine

In Australia, the valiant Liberal Democratic Party – the LDP – Australia's only libertarian party, struggles along under a perennial identity crisis. Its platform too often veers into single-issue self-interest. It recently merged with the Outdoor Recreation party. Thus giving the impression that it's not about the principle of freedom for them. That it's about a few specific freedoms for wealthy gun owners and motorcycle riders.

The Australian people could be forgiven for arguing that this is not libertarianism. That this is project-based lobbying.

It smacks of "fogies doin' it for themselves".

The ethics of freedom

The problem of morality under a libertarian order does need to be addressed. I can't help but wonder whether someone who assumes maximum individual liberty needs to be morally virtuous in some prescribed ways.

The implication of our heavily regulated society is that we need big government, a patronising nanny state and sprawling regulations to make us behave more virtuously toward each other. That these limitations and oppressive social structures keep us from running each other over with our cars, or allowing a starving man to die in the street, or leaving a battered child in the care of cruel parents.

Criticism has been levelled at libertarianism for creating a moral vacuum, by replacing shared ethics with the principle of non-coercion. This 'chaotic dystopia' is unattractive to many people who fear that the consequence of a society with only one rule would be moral disintegration.

So in order to make libertarianism more widely appealing it is essential that individuals who take the freedoms of libertarianism behave in a morally accountable way.

Ayn Rand set out the values and virtues that are required to create a non-coercive state in *Objectivist Ethics*. These are: "...one's acceptance of the responsibility of forming one's own judgments and of living by the work of one's own mind (which is the virtue of Independence). It means that one must never sacrifice one's convictions to the opinions or wishes of others (which is the virtue of Integrity) - that one must never attempt to fake reality in any manner (which is the virtue of Honesty) - that one must never seek or grant the unearned and undeserved, neither in matter nor in spirit (which is the virtue of Justice)."

These are the values she considers inalienable to a person's self respect. We suggest that it is the current regulatory society that has robbed us of our self-respect and that it is the morally infantile, nannied individual it has created which cannot be trusted with freedom.

But is libertarianism still relevant today anyway?

Here in Australia, libertarianism's one short swing into the limelight during the 1970s was presumably a product of the political environment at the time. The economic mismanagement and anti-enterprise policies of the short-lived Whitlam government and the troubling existence of Communist countries surely spurred the start of the Workers Party.

The Workers Party may not have gained seats in parliament but it did achieve a constituency and created popular awareness of its libertarian platform.

With the return to Keynesianism in the form of enormous government borrowing and incontinent spending, and the current government's social conservatism, we may be drifting into the sort of political environment that squeezes that bit of libertarianism in all of us further to the surface.

I presume we'll hear many economic examples of government encroachment into our lives in other talks today; the internet is a threat to children and therefore Senator Conroy should censor it for all and slow down productivity in the mean time. Unhealthy foods can make kids fat and in some Sydney schools the children are subjected to Maoist lunch box inspections to shame families into packing lunches that are deemed 'good' by teachers and health-crusaders. One group of people begins to think it has a right – even a duty – to order another around.

Whether they originate from the Left or the Right, it is these forms of censorship and prohibition which we oppose. Which doesn't mean that your average Joe Libertarian has to believe in drugs, kinky love and the wild wild West. In fact, I see no contradiction in a practicing libertarian living a *gemutlich* life indistinguishable from that of a suburban conservative or the earnest life of a serious eco-head. As Mill said, "the only freedom which deserves the name is that of pursuing our own good, in our own way".

So the difference is not in the mode of existence but in the mode of propagating that existence. As soon as you decide you've found the ideal mode of being and that others need to learn to do it your way – in fact, the moment you take that very first step on the road to Utopia, you're off the path of freedom.

Which is why libertarianism will always be a radical theory, because no matter how idyllic a moment in history might become, no matter how suited to becoming the status quo, libertarianism will always encompass the right of individual to be unhappy by refusing to comply.

Bringing freedom back

So back to how libertarianism can be made cool. And if, as we argue, it's still relevant today, how do we go about reintroducing libertarian ideas?

The great unspoken issue that libertarianism faces is that most critics of the philosophy aren't freedom-hating leftards. What frightens people about libertarianism is the idea that something terrible might happen to them and they'll need to rely on the social security system.

It's a mistake to dismiss these concerns out of hand. We don't need to deny the good in the current system to condemn all that's bad in it.

I think it's encouraging that in Germany the Classic Liberals – the Freie Demokratische Partei – got nearly 15% of the vote in the last year's election and formed a coalition with the conservative, fiscally responsible Christliche Demokratische Partei. This encourages me to think that, when offered a practical way of addressing the issues, rational people will embrace a more pragmatic way out.

We may never have a viable alternative party to be the focus for that kind of protest in Australia. So Australians need to be offered accessible, individualised ways to reclaim their freedoms.

Every one of the choices we make is the result of weighing up what one thing is worth to us compared with another. Chocolate versus apple. Fat versus skinny.

Now let's say the government has banned chocolate. They don't believe I'm choosing the fruit often enough by myself. So they've banned the 'bad' food for my own good. Furthermore, there's a new study out to show that if I gain another five kilos, I will be a burden on the healthcare system.

While it's easy to make the moral argument that I should have the right to inflict as much fatness as I want upon myself, it's trickier to argue when that fatness translates into a burden on others. Especially if I'm not ready to ditch the system entirely. Especially if I think the system we have, though flawed, is better than none.

But don't worry (stress is a leading cause of illness and I literally can't afford to have you worry) – I have the solution.

The Human Rights Initiative

It's important that my Initiative have 'Human Rights' in the title. I need to make it very clear that this is about our rights as human beings.

The Human Rights Initiative is a scheme to help each individual reclaim the rights they value most. In a way, it will allow us to 'buy them back' from the government. Let me stress that it's an Initiative only – a protest, not an end point.

And it goes like this:

In order to reclaim my right to eat chocolate, I sign a document saying that I take the consequences of eating chocolate upon myself. This document limits government liability (the treatment it would have had to provide me via the healthcare system). So if I present with diabetes II, trans-clogged arteries or morbid

obesity, I will not be eligible for treatment out of the public kitty. Because I have made a conscious decision, which means I must also accept the consequences.

I have set myself free to be responsible.

Now that the government and the tax payer are released from bearing the consequences of my decision, they no longer have any claim to restrict my choices. So if I'm caught buying or eating chocolate – no fine, no imprisonment. The government no longer has the leverage to make me do things 'for my own good'.

I know some people are going to say, "well, your metaphor is clearly a metaphor for using drugs and drugs have other externalities attached you can't extrapolate from chocolate".

In fact it's not. My metaphor is a metaphor for riding a pushbike without a helmet. (Wild, eh? Outta control.) I do recognise and admit that there are externalities attached to drug and alcohol use that aren't adequately addressed by my simplistic chocolate example. I'm open to suggestions on how to perfect the re-claim or re-purchase contracts for those substances.

I think my scheme is good for two reasons: (1) it gives us all some real action we can take right now to assert our desire for freedoms and our willingness to accept the responsibilities which they entail; (2) it requires some genuine thought on what responsibilities we are prepared to take upon us. Which is - as we mentioned before in our discussion on ethics - an essential part of moving towards a less coercive society.

Have a think about it. It may not be Atlas shrugging but it's definitely a toe-wiggle in the right direction.

Never mind the bollocks, here's the 12-step program

Now in the vein of finding solutions instead of carping on about problems, we turned to a programme which Hollywood has tried and found good. We reason that if it's good enough for Lindsay Lohan, it's good enough for Libertarianism. We've adapted a 12-step program especially for our ailing freedoms. Allow us to take you through it now.

We're told that the first step is admitting the problem. It seems to us that the 12-steppers put their fingers on the problem so accurately, they just about invented it.

Step 1:

We admitted we were powerless - that our lives had become unmanageable.

We came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of Government as we understood Him.

Spooky. It almost feels like a historical account. We did though, didn't we? From the wild frontier country that we once were, within the space of 200 years we just gave up and handed control over lives to the government.

Step 2: Take a searching and fearless moral inventory of our options.

Being born into or joining Australian society we are conscripted into the laws, regulations and moral code that exists.

We have few alternatives, we can choose to become an outlaw, criminal or self-sustaining Huon-hugger. Or we can join the Seasteaders and start a new social experiment on the ocean.

As none of the above particularly appeal to our middleclass sensibilities, the following steps outline a more realistic approach to reclaiming our individual rights.

Step 3: Admit to the Government, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.

The dirty secret of the status quo is that we generally already do just as we please – thereby transgressing the laws we pay through our taxes to uphold.

By admitting openly to these transgressions we can protest by example against unnecessary and arbitrary laws and regulations.

We are not children. So let's stop acting like Nanny State has the right to make us wear our seatbelts – or even our woollies – and start acting like the owners of this legal system. Repeat to yourself: I paid for those laws. And I pay for the means of enforcing them. They are mine to change.

Step 4: We're entirely ready to have the Government cease and desist His unwanted 'protection'....Humbly ask Him to remove the unnecessary costs He imposes upon us.

By taking responsibility for ourselves we could, theoretically, remove some of the unnecessary laws, regulations and 'services' that we are currently paying for the government to inflict upon us. Here are some odd quirks of government that we would be pleased to be rid of....

Payments for voting – I don't mean pork barreling or election promises, I wouldn't know where to start to get rid of those – I mean the \$2.25 electoral candidates are paid by the Electoral Commission for every vote they get once they've won 4% of the first preference vote. For example in the Higgins by-election late last year, the AEC gave the Liberal Party \$81,892.98 and the Greens \$40,630.77 of public funding for the votes they'd won.

And taking it to the extreme we now have a new Minister for Population. Tshis federal government just keeps getting more absurd, from trying to control the weather to Malthusian hand-wringing about population levels in forty years. If the Prime Minister's Newspeak is not bad enough, there is something unashamedly Orwellian about a Ministry of Population.

Step 5: Make a list of all extraneous controls He places upon us, and demand their repeal....Require Him to make direct amends to individuals for the impositions upon them.

For example, as we mentioned earlier, the need to wear a helmet when riding a bike. What do those helmets really do anyway? Next it will be fast food, smoking at home, and so on and so forth. And don't get me started on the confusing and contradictory recommendations for carrying a baby to term – thank god they're not laws (yet)! Quick, call the Department of Community Services and Child Protection, that exhausted and stressed out potential murderess is reaching for a white wine spritzer.

Step 6: Continue to take personal inventory and when we are wrong promptly admit it.

If Aristotle, Mill and Rand are correct, our goal as individuals is to take responsibility for ourselves in order to flourish and fulfill our potential.

This requires continual review of our own intentions as well as of the outcomes of our actions.

The evil of successive Communist regimes was not in their intentions. It was in their steadfast refusal to admit that they were not achieving the Utopia they had dreamed of. The system we now associate with the word 'Communism' – propaganda, secret police, social authoritarianism and terror – was a direct result of the failure to take honest inventory and admit that things weren't turning out as hoped. The cover-up is what we often now mean when we refer to Communism.

One of the attractive aspects of libertarianism is the focus on personal responsibility, which requires above all a high degree of honesty with yourself. Or, as Rand wrote, "that one must never attempt to fake reality in any manner".

Step 7: Do not seek through idle prayer and dreamy contemplation ... blah blah blah.

I think that's enough of that one. It stands without all the spiritual tosh down the back, just as "Do not SEEK through idle prayer and dreamy contemplation". Ye are pretty damn unlikely to find that way.

Everybody loves a good Utopia. That seems as deeply ingrained in our natures as our inability to maintain one. And libertarianism has its fair share of Utopians; Ayn Rand was surely the worst. The dangerous thing about Utopians is that they conceive of a perfect state and either, as I mentioned in Step 6, barge through any evidence in order to create and/or defend it.

So I suggest we ditch the vision of a perfect endpoint and concentrate our ideals on the necessities of the minute. Instead of building a seasteed, what about privatising the ferry system?

Step 8: Seek to present a viable alternative to Government rule as we know it by practicing a libertarian morality.

As mentioned earlier, learning to behave in ways that will help to underpin a more self-reliant culture. Self respect as the foundation of respect for others.

Step 9: Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we must try to carry this message to the coddled and the cowardly and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

Australians are currently so coddled and swaddled that most of us wouldn't know how to function if Nanny State suddenly left us alone at the fair. The government currently ensures that our drinking water is clean, our roads signposted, our toothbrushes effective and that, regardless how careless we are in choosing it, that next greasy kebab is unlikely to be our last.

But the more we have come to rely on others to vet every aspect of our lives for us, the more vulnerable we are to shonky dealers who slip through the vetting cracks. The regulators then cry out that more regulation is required. And the cycle continues. Our duty of care for ourselves has effectively been removed.

We need to reclaim freedom incrementally and, as we do so, provide an example to those who can't yet imagine a life without Nanny.

Enough earnestness

The final three steps are intended to rehabilitate libertarianism's cool. If we want libertarianism to survive we need to broaden the appeal of individualism.

Step 10:

Remember that freedoms are more than just fiscal. The purpose of free trade should be to purchase social freedom.

Step 11:

Let's not take ourselves too seriously. It's good to be pragmatic but it's inspiring to be wild and idealistic.

Step 12:

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