

There is a key passage in the musicale, *THE FIDDLER ON THE ROOF*, which asks the Rabbi if there is a blessing for the Czar. The Rabbi's blessing is 'May God bless and keep the Czar far away from us.' The tragedy of the story is that the prayer is unanswered.

Governments which needlessly restrict the lives of their peoples are tyrannous: Governments which allow freedom of action are liberal. This classification does not distinguish governments by the way that authority is gained and legitimised but by the way authority is used. It is as old as Aristotle. The prime virtue of the democracies is not that their governments are more legitimate but that these governments have a far better record of liberality than other forms of government.

While democracies are less likely to behave like Russian Czars, democracy does not guarantee liberality. Consider that Hitler was democratically elected, that South Africa is a democracy of sorts, that Athens democratically condemned Socrates; consider the French Republic at the time of the French Revolution; consider Australian treatment of the Kanaka sugar cane workers in Queensland.

Neither does the absence of democracy preclude a liberal society. The Taiwanese government is elected by such an extreme gerrymander that Taiwan really does not qualify as a democracy, yet its people enjoy income that is expanding faster and is more widely distributed than in almost any country.

Hong Kong makes no pretence of popular government; it remains a crown colony. Yet Hong Kong is a humane, liberal society which has not only prospered but has absorbed an extraordinary number of refugees from countries which claim to enjoy a form of popular government. Only now that Red China is overtaking Hong Kong is the prosperity and the freedom threatened. If the democratic British had governed themselves half so well as they governed Hong Kong they would have avoided declining living standards and events like miners' strikes.

Non-Communist East Asia has not contributed much to political theory. Its people can afford the luxury of ignoring politics because their 'Czars' leave their daily round alone. They have the freedom to buy or sell, rent or lease, work for wages or offer employment on mutually agreed terms and conditions which are no concern of the Czar. Blessed with economic freedom they apparently feel less concerned about politics.

Most people are concerned about their own living standards and since they spend most of their lives either earning or spending, economic freedom is no small matter. Those who condemn VOLUNTARY market processes (economic freedom) as exploitive, and who decry materialism should not be taken too seriously; without a blush they use COMPULSORY political processes to get earning and spending contrivances for themselves. In short for material gain.

Singapore's Mr Lee Kuan Yew, after a very mild recent electoral rebuke, wondered in public whether unrestrained democracy is consistent with the long term good of his people. Singapore has done remarkably well; from very poor beginnings after the Second World War Singaporean living standards have improved so much that on present trends they will better Australian living standards sometime within the 1990s. Professor Hughes pointed out that the next generation of Australians will probably go to Singapore to enjoy highly paid table waiting jobs as the Irish now go to Continental Europe. Lee seems to be worried that Singaporean democrats, who are too young to remember what it once was like, will vote themselves contrivances which will destroy the economic freedom which has overcome poverty and in a racially volatile community put politics on a back burner.

Both he and the late Korean President Park Chung Hee have observed that economic freedom comes before political freedom. A society in which the leading Opposition figure is arrested, as Kim Dae Jung was arrested in Korea, is seriously flawed, but so is a society in which citizens are punished for exchanging work and goods at illegal prices, where employment is reserved for members of privileged societies and where strike breaking workers suffer physical violence. The latter society, while sometimes less tyrannous to leaders, is far more tyrannous to the average Joe Blow or Wang Dho. The difference no doubt accounts for Joe Blow's political sophistication and Wang Dho's political indifference.

On the other side of the world, the military dictator of Nigeria, General Buhari, falls short of everybody's ideal, but most of that country's relatively free press greeted his coup with relief. The democracy he replaced was too corrupt, was costing too many lives and had reduced the wealthiest Black African nation to virtual bankruptcy. It remains to be seen whether Buhari will, like East Asia's scarcely democratic nations, allow the economic liberties or whether he will rely on a combination of symbolism and force to restore prosperity. Even well intentioned military men have a bad habit of relying on flags and force.

The United States has combined more economic liberty than most countries, over a longer period than most, with a democracy which is as free from flaws as any. Its founders, James Madison in particular, understood the link between economic liberty and personal well-being. Although democracy alone is an insufficient guarantee of economic freedom, economic freedom is not inconsistent with democracy. Madison understood these things and tried unsuccessfully to have the right to own property included in the preamble to the American Constitution.

Although totalitarian government sometimes works well none of its forms can speak for tomorrow's incumbents and so cannot guarantee anything. I don't see that Mr Lee can escape his real dilemma by abandoning democracy nor do the limited accounts of his views suggest that that is his intention. Rather, like Madison, he seems to be considering constitutional guaranties.