

# WHAT TO DO AND WHAT NOT TO DO

NICHOLAS ELLIOTT

This is an important essay. Believing in freedom is fine but it is better to believe in freedom and make others believe in it too. This essay will tell you what to do and what not to do as a libertarian activist.

“The discussions of every age are filled with the issues on which its leading schools of thought differ. But the general intellectual atmosphere of the time is always determined by the views on which the opposing schools agree. They become the unspoken presuppositions of all thought, and common and unquestioningly accepted foundations on which all discussion proceeds.” (F. A. Hayek, *The Counter-Revolution of Science*, p. 367)

These unspoken presuppositions should be the major target of libertarian propaganda. At the moment they are statist — that the welfare state helps the poor, that capitalism exploits people, and so on. These must be challenged with the eventual aim of instilling libertarian prejudices. A free society will not exist unless enough people believe in a free society.

## Tactical Notes No. 3

ISSN 0268-2923 ISBN 0 948317 93 0

An occasional publication of the Libertarian Alliance,  
25 Chapter Chambers, Esterbrooke Street, London SW1P 4NN  
www.libertarian.co.uk email: admin@libertarian.co.uk

© 1986: Libertarian Alliance; Nicolas Elliott.

Nick Elliott is the Secretary of the York University Freedom Society, for whom he edits *The Moderate*, and for whom he has also written a number of shorter leaflets. Some of these writings are being reprinted by the Libertarian Alliance (see for example Economic Notes Numbers 1 and 8). He has also contributed to the IEA's journal *Economic Affairs*.

The views expressed in this publication are those of its author and not necessarily those of the Libertarian Alliance, its Committee, Advisory Council or subscribers.

Director: Dr Chris R. Tame  
Editorial Director: Brian Micklethwait  
Webmaster: Dr Sean Gabb

**FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY**



## THE “POSITIONS OF POWER” ARGUMENT

Ideas succeed by being stated. This is where too many libertarians go wrong. They think that because libertarianism is unpopular it should not be publicly spoken about, and that libertarians should remain sleepers until they have become MPs or have positions of power. This is a terrible folly. To most people libertarianism is not acceptable. Therefore, to be accepted involves being un-libertarian. Once the desired position is achieved the sleeper must remain a sleeper, because otherwise the position will be lost. Now, where has all the power gone?

The second reason it is folly is that those who pursue it waste time in factional scheming, and frequently lose sight of the libertarian objective. Scheming may be fun in itself, but is an inefficient way of spreading libertarianism. There are two good arguments for libertarians being involved in political parties: (1) this enables you to meet people who are likely to be interested in libertarian ideas, and (2) political parties have superior resources for spreading ideas. For the achievement of (1) no participation in scheming is required. (2), in my experience, is not particularly significant. I have usually had the means to say what I want to who I want to hear it. Going after the marginally superior resources of a party means filling up time with scheming that is better spent being libertarian. Then we're back to the positions of power argument again. To get the resources you need a committee post, to get a committee post you have to be popular, to be popular you have to conform to the paradigm, which is not libertarian.

## MICRO-POLITICS

Another strategy of libertarianism is the micro-politics of the Adam Smith Institute: gradual change, buying off hostile interest groups with the benefits created by the free market, and creating supportive interest groups. This doesn't necessarily conflict with the strategy of changing ideas, but some libertarians such as Dr Madsen Pirie

(who runs the ASI) believe the LA approach is of minor importance and that micro-politics is the way to go about it. The ASI appears to have resolved the problem of enacting libertarian policies which offend interest groups. It is true, as well, that experience of privatisation spreads knowledge of the free market more widely than books. Yet there are still policies on which people don't decide with their pockets. There are libertarian policies which are at the moment unacceptable on any grounds. In some cases there is a strong positive appeal in the political use of an activity as a scapegoat (drug trading, viewing pornography). This can only be changed by changing ideas. A defect of micro-politics is that it depends upon a receptive government ear. If the Labour party is elected at the next election I fear that the Adam Smith Institute will be casting its seeds of wisdom onto stony ground. On the other hand, the advance of ideas does not depend much on political parties: whoever is in government, libertarian ideas will continue to spread.

Virtually nothing can be done in politics unless it is politically acceptable (unless done in secret, and radical change cannot take place in secret). The politician derives his "power" from being acceptable, so will not do or say unacceptable things. Micro-politics is very useful for implementing acceptable policies by circumventing interest groups. It is not much use for bringing about political acceptability. Without the ASI there would have been less privatisation than there has been. Without extreme advocates of liberty the ASI would have had no favourable government to seduce with its proposals. I have frequently heard the Libertarian Alliance accused of doing nothing to bring about the kind of society it wants. People who say this fail to realise that the best way to bring about a free society is to persuade others to believe in a free society, which is exactly what the LA does.

## NO PUBLICITY IS BAD PUBLICITY

Libertarianism is extreme and unpopular. But the more we talk about it the more popular and moderate it will become. What this means in terms of media coverage is that no publicity is bad publicity. When radical ideas are first encountered the response is ridicule and character assassination: "Libertarians are child molesters." Next comes outrage: "Good God! These evil people actually want to legalise heroin." Finally comes rational criticism: "... they say that the welfare state harms the poor, but the evidence presented is defective in that ..." It is not possible to go straight to stage three. Since we want to go to stage three, we must go through stages one and two. Every bit of ridicule and outrage provoked is a positive move. Most reporting of libertarianism, however distorting, contains some information, if only that we actually exist. We should have nothing to fear from stage three because libertarianism has some very good arguments behind it.

## EVENTS IN FCS

When I went to my first FCS (Federation of Conservative Students — ed.) conference at Loughborough in 1985 the dries were dry and the wets were wet. The dries spoke about individual freedom and privatisation, the wets

about supporting the National Health Service and more state spending. When I went to the 1986 conference the wets were dry and the dries were very dry. The wets had changed their name from "Conservative Student Unionists" to the more strident "Students Against Socialism". Both factions were supporting individual freedom and privatisation. Why? Because extreme libertarians have shifted the centre of debate towards liberty. So much for people being scared off by extremism. Maybe the only reason wets are expounding individual freedom is to be popular — to seek the median voter, but as long as they are doing so their motives aren't important. I might think the earth is flat but if I don't say so then it doesn't really matter, does it? And I might be a libertarian, but unless I say so then effectively I'm not.

## MICRO-EXTREMISM

Everything I have said so far has been to establish one basic point — say what you think and say it whenever given the opportunity. The point is simple but essential, and widely neglected.

The same applies when presenting libertarianism individually as it does in aggregate: do not flinch from advocating the unpopular parts of libertarianism. Someone intelligent and rational will not be scared off by radicalism. They may disagree, but unless you put the libertarian case to start with you will never know either way. Libertarians who dilute their arguments assume that their audience will reason as follows — "Yes, I agree with you on everything except X, which I find so objectionable that I want nothing to do with you whatsoever." If your audience thinks like this then you're talking to the wrong people. These people are not worth talking to, because they're no use to libertarianism. Libertarians disagree on many issues, but this rarely alienates libertarians from each other.

In fact, extremism saves a lot of time, because it acts as a beacon to potential converts. Assortative attraction and repulsion occurs because only someone interested in coherent ideas will respond to extremism by asking to know more. If you present libertarianism as something other than libertarianism then you are likely to be dogged by the kind of vote-seeking careerists who inhabit political parties.

Libertarianism is not about immediate gratification. As the *Purpose And Strategy of The Libertarian Alliance* explains, ideas do not change overnight, and the intention of libertarian propaganda is to effect a total paradigm shift by the 22nd century. It is a further misconception to think that, unless there is a tally of converts to show off, propaganda has not worked. In the same way as the aggregate of ideas changes gradually so do individual opinions. Incremental conversion is what will occur in most people, and because this is imperceptible patience is a virtue of activism.

I am very optimistic about the future of libertarianism. But just imagine if every libertarian could convert two to the cause every year (which is not so difficult). There would very soon be too many of us to fit in the Alternative Bookshop, even using the basement.