

# LIBERTARIANISM ON CAMPUS: HOW TO REPRODUCE THE YORK PHENOMENON

ADAM  
CHACKSFIELD



## SUCCESS

In the last few years, the University of York has become renowned within libertarian and Conservative Student circles for having a large number of exceptionally well informed, radical and committed libertarian activists. As Chair of Conservative Students from 1990-1992, my priority was to maintain and improve this phenomenon. As a libertarian activist, I believe the recruitment of others must be viewed as the prime goal. Success should not be defined in terms of winning Student Union seats, winning the re-election of local councillors or maximising branch membership figures. Although there is nothing necessarily wrong with achieving such things, they should not be allowed to detract from the important task of creating a sizeable group of well informed libertarians.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF A SINGLE ACTIVIST

If you are a lone libertarian activist it is important not to be discouraged by the mass of leftists around you. So long as there are people interested in the truth of their beliefs you can be influential. Every activist you convince of libertarianism is likely to convince others, thus your initial work can have remarkable consequences. The libertarians I recruited at York are now recruiting others who may never have come across libertarianism had I kept the ideas to myself. Activism can have results far beyond those you immediately perceive. For example, Sheldon Richman, a Cato Institute policy analyst, converted Dave Barry to libertarianism, when they both taught effective writing classes. Dave Barry went on to become a famous humourist whose work appears throughout the American press and often helps popularise libertarian ideas.

## HOW TO FIND POTENTIAL RECRUITS TO THE CAUSE

The most important quality of a potential recruit is a strong interest in ideas. Only those interested in ideas will become motivated to activism by them, will bother to become well informed, or will be willing to adopt radical positions like libertarianism. Those who are reluctant to debate or are too pig-headed to change their positions even when logical flaws are clearly shown to exist in them, are not truly interested in ideas. Despite my efforts, the only activists I was able to recruit were from Conservative Students, or people already adverse to the left. It is worthwhile libertarians joining Conservative Student groups, as there will often be a number of socially liberal and market-sympathetic individuals who are prepared to identify themselves as intellectual dissidents within the student body. It is

also important not to judge people's potential by their views when they first meet you. Wets interested in ideas are far more likely to make good libertarian activists than Thatcherites who are uninterested in ideas. Therefore, when deciding who to spend time arguing with, prioritise on the basis of their interest in ideas rather than the degree to which they are already in agreement with you. If there are enough libertarians it may be worth establishing an explicitly libertarian group to promote debate, arrange speakers, and publicise libertarianism without the constraints of acting with the Conservatives.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF DEBATE

When involved in Conservative Students do not lose sight of the key goal of recruiting libertarian activists. The way to do this is to encourage debate within the Conservative group so that assumptions can be challenged and thought provoked. In the bar after the meetings may well prove at least as productive a setting as the meetings themselves. Pay no attention to those who do not appreciate the detailed discussion of libertarianism. This discussion is crucial in improving the understanding of libertarian activists and maintaining their interest in the ideas. It is far more productive than political intrigue and plotting.

## THE METHOD OF ARGUMENT

It is a common myth that, when arguing, moderation is a good strategy. In reality, moderation simply makes your position less consistent and often reinforces your opponent's position by conceding some of his key claims. Moderation is understandably attractive as a method of increasing vote totals or 'winning' a debate, simply because it reduces the size of the task you are attempting to accomplish. However, the long-term task of promoting libertarianism remains unachieved, and may even be retarded by your reinforcement of principles you oppose in reality. The worst crime of all is directly to deny, contradict, or attack beliefs you hold, for the mere purpose of increasing your temporary appeal in a debate or worthless student union election.

My condemnation of moderation should not be confused with a desire to shock everyone. Being shocking for the sake of it may give you some personal satisfaction, but is likely to make your task of persuasion more difficult. Libertarianism is radical enough, and need not be presented to make it seem more so. Pursuing the path of least resistance is by far the most fruitful method of arguing, and does not involve moderation of your position or compromising your principles. Following the path of least resistance involves attacking the beliefs of your opponent where they are most vulnerable, and where the application of libertarian principles will shock least. Another good way to avoid alienating your audience when making the libertarian case is always to remember that the vast majority of people share the libertarian goal of a prosperous society with as much freedom as possible; they simply disagree over the means to achieve this.

Imagine you are attempting to persuade someone of the advantages of a libertarian anarchy. Do not be moderate and argue that agricultural subsidies need to be reduced, but should not be abolished altogether. Do not try to shock by immediately steering the debate onto whether or not defence should be privatised, while your opponent still believes that the Common Agricultural Policy is wonderful. Instead one should argue for an international free market in agriculture, because to persuade someone of this is relatively simple, and will put your opponent on the slippery slope towards libertarianism by showing him the value of markets and the problems with politics. By contrast the moderate approach may lead to a quick 'victory' in the argument, but leads your opponent to think that you share his dislike of totally free markets, and differ only in your beliefs about the desirable degree of intervention. The shocking approach will probably not do any harm, but is unlikely to produce many benefits, as the path chosen is the most difficult one.

Sometimes even intelligent people can be side-tracked into a belief that only things that are on the political agenda today are worth talking about. To engage in a debate about what is politically viable today, however, leads to pointless speculation, and ineffectiveness with regard to the promotion of libertarianism. Before someone can become persuaded of libertarianism it is generally necessary to make sure that they understand that political possibilities change massively

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25 Chapter Chambers, Esterbrooke Street, London SW1P 4NN  
www.libertarian.co.uk email: admin@libertarian.co.uk

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Adam Chacksfield graduated in 1992 in Economics and Politics at York. He also managed the successful 1992 Libertarian Party Ballot Drive in Virginia.

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

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over time, and therefore long-term goals are relevant. Let the politicians worry over short-term political imperatives.<sup>1</sup> If someone remains obsessed with short-term events, and shows little interest in ideas, they are probably not worth arguing with.

My specific views about the key arguments that I am about to outline reflect my own beliefs and interests, therefore, they may not suit people who come to libertarianism with different interests. However, in my experience these methods are very successful. The key thing to remember when arguing is that principles count more than history. No libertarian propagandist can possibly know more details about every issue than everyone else, but this should be largely irrelevant. Historical facts presented in an argument either imply a theory or a confused merger of several theories, in either case the opponent's position can be attacked without any acquaintance with the facts of the example given. It is important not to end up arguing over facts and throwing examples at each other which fail to illuminate the theoretical weaknesses in your opponent's position.<sup>2</sup> A good way to start is by identifying the principles underlying the opposing position. Many people, especially those with conventional political opinions will implicitly advocate deeply contradictory principles when dealing with different issues, and much progress can be made simply by pointing out these logical contradictions. The consistent application of any set of principles will always lead to radical conclusions when compared to political orthodoxy. This method of argument pushes your opponent into adopting radical views which then makes libertarianism appear more acceptable. A classic example of this is showing an advocate of the welfare state that it is nationalist. To be a consistent egalitarian he should advocate redistribution from the poor of this country to the poor elsewhere. Also, many people believe that their views are compatible with liberty. It is therefore important to show how their principles conflict with liberty.

With a few exceptions, and whatever people's principles are, they will generally be interested in how many goods and services people will be able to consume. This is why the economic arguments for liberty are by far the most powerful. Why bother trying to persuade someone of the existence of mythical natural rights that supposedly prohibit redistributive taxation, when one can show that redistributive taxation always reduces the welfare of the poor. This is because the rate of increase in wages for unskilled labour is dependent upon increased productivity, which in turn occurs when more capital is invested per worker. As redistributive taxation reduces incentives for capital creation, it also must reduce the rate of increase in wages. Therefore, in the long-run, any redistribution will always have the effect of reducing the welfare of unskilled workers (not to mention everyone else). This argument is not based on statistics subject to variation; it is based on the logical implications of basic concepts that are as true as the fact that you are presently reading this article. If you wish to be a truly effective libertarian propagandist it is essential that you acquaint yourself with at least the basic principles of Austrian Economics. There is simply no purpose in arguing the ethical position against redistribution when it can be shown that redistribution actually reduces the living standards of those it is supposed to help. Equally there is no purpose in trying to support your case with dubious economic statistics that can do no more than imply the strength of your argument when Austrian economics will prove your case true.

When arguing, do not expect your opponent immediately to become a libertarian. Even if you use all the best techniques as outlined above, it will normally take some time for a person fully to come to terms with your arguments. Few people will happily accept defeat in argument there and then, but if your arguments have been presented clearly and persuasively, they may well have a significant impact whether or not this is conceded immediately.<sup>3</sup> Giving them libertarian literature may help promote this outcome.

## SPEAKERS

Libertarian speakers can serve a dual purpose in the recruitment of libertarian activists by presenting the libertarian case effectively and giving credibility to your position by showing that other intelligent people share your views. It is also good to invite politicians to speak, as they typically appear to lack principles and intellect when confronted over the logical contradictions evident in their statements. This increases the likelihood that people will reject conventional party politics.

## CONFERENCES

Conferences are good events at which to influence people from other universities. They also have the benefit of showing the superiority of well informed libertarian activists in debate with party political hacks. It really does not matter if libertarians end up speaking a lot individually, as they will be far more memorable and entertaining than the normal waffle praising the Minister. The idea that to be important in Conservative Students it is necessary to avoid making controversial statements mistakes titles for importance. A quasi-libertarian who reaches the National Committee by not offending the party is far less significant than a radical who makes memorable speeches scaring the hacks and impressing others with the coherence of the libertarian case. Always present a principled case, conceding nothing, in the most appealing way. The social events often associated with conferences are a good time to seek out like-minded students from other universities, but try to avoid becoming involved in all the hacking for worthless positions in the Conservative Student organisation.

## STUDENT UNIONS

Student Union politics are not important. This should never be forgotten. To win administrative posts on the executive of these Unions is of no value other than that of annoying ideological opponents. It is certainly not worth compromising your ideological position to achieve this. Union meetings can be a fun way of showing the leftists the coherence and comprehensiveness of radical libertarianism, and can induce a defensive and conservative attitude amongst the left-wing activists. Also remember that you do not have to defend the Conservative party. It is far easier to defend a consistent ideological position than the compromises and deals that the party advocates. In any case, your advocacy of Health Service privatisation will do far more to make the internal market seem reasonable than a direct defence of the internal market.

## OTHER CAMPUS ACTIVITIES

Writing in the campus press is perhaps the best way of propagating libertarian ideas generally on campus. Well written articles are likely to have far more effect than any speech at a union meeting. Even if they are unlikely to produce libertarian activists, such articles help to show students generally that there is an alternative to the moderate leftist conservatism that represents the campus consensus.

Attending the meetings of other campus groups when they are considering political issues can be a very effective way of promoting libertarianism. A meeting that particularly sticks in my mind was held by the Christian Union on third world poverty. Three other libertarians and I went along and argued with about twenty christians who had previously felt that poverty was in some way linked to capitalism. The christians received a crash course in market economics which may not have totally convinced them all, but at least undermined any confidence they had in the usual leftist remedies.

## CONCLUSION

Whatever you do by way of promoting libertarianism, you should enjoy it. Different people enjoy different activities, and you are likely to be far more successful concentrating on the things you enjoy. The aim of this article is not to tell libertarians exactly what to do, it is to give them a clearer idea of what is an effective way of promoting libertarianism and what is not.

If you are interested in promoting libertarianism, whether in university or not, you should consider your goals and your methods, so as to avoid wasting time doing the wrong things. The efficient use of the time given to promoting libertarianism will accelerate the pace with which libertarian ideas become disseminated throughout society, and help reshape it. Finally, be confident. The York phenomenon can be reproduced. You can make a difference.

## NOTES

1. See *The Purpose and Strategy of the Libertarian Alliance*, Tactical Notes 1, Libertarian Alliance, London, 1986.
2. See Brian Micklethwait, *The Tyranny of The Facts*, Tactical Notes 7, Libertarian Alliance, London, 1990.
3. See Brian Micklethwait, *How To Win The Libertarian Argument*, Tactical Notes No. 8, Libertarian Alliance, London, 1990.