

At the heart of
liberalism lies a fear
of unchecked power

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To begin to analyse this claim I looked up the definition of liberal/liberty and the definition of power. Without researching any further, it is obvious that the two are fundamentally contradictory. Power is 'when A can make B do something that it would not usually do' (Robert Dahl), and Liberty is simply that 'B has the right not to be subjugated by A'. For this essay I will look at the extent to which the statement is true and why. I can trace this fear of unchecked power back to the very beginning of the formation of the party.

Liberalism originates as an ideology of the industrialised West and a product of the break down of feudalism and the growth of the capitalist market society and reflecting the aspirations of a rising middle class. It is clear that the ideology would be opposed to strong government because it had struggled for so long to overthrow the old system of aristocracy that lead the authoritarian government. To the traditional supporters of Liberalism- the middle class, the government brought nothing but bad news, refusing to recognise them as a rising class or extend the franchise to include them.

It is especially important to them to place limits on government and codify rights and freedoms to prevent such transgression from occurring again.

Liberals believe in the mechanics of free trade and laissez-faire when it comes to economics. Adam Smith argued that the economy works better when left alone and David Ricardo believed that it promoted trade. Free trade was something that united Liberals, classical and modern alike and had been in existence within the ideology since Cobden and the Repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846.

It appealed to classical liberals because minimal state intervention increased their freedom to pursue their own self interests and economic activity. It appealed to the modern liberals because it eliminated the possibility for excessively high profit through competition and therefore was a fairer way to run the economy. As well as uniting them for free trade, it also united them in their dislike of the state, especially when looking at the examples of when government has used Mercantilism or Keynesianism which in their opinion has driven the country into economic slowdown.

The belief in laissez-faire on an economic base is easily transformed into a belief in laissez-faire within social and political aspects of life and gave way to the idea of minimal government. Liberalism's key principle is that of maximum individual freedom, individualism supreme over any other collective body. John Locke and Thomas Jefferson asserted that there were 3 'inalienable rights' which everyone possessed, these were; 'life, liberty and property' and they could never be removed. The strength in defence of these basic rights shows just how apprehensive liberals are of the state that may attempt to alter or suppress them.

Rights are essential for justice and the framework for a rational society without which chaos would rise up. Liberals support universalism, that individuals everywhere possess common universal features and are of equal moral worth, they therefore disapprove of social privileges. Even though we are now living in a far more meritocratic society, I believe that the same resent and mistrust of those in power still exists, as generally those in power are seen to be from a rich aristocratic background and good education, etc.

Anarcho-liberals are so anti-government that they come close to proposing to abolish it altogether. The state is the being that wields power. Classical liberalism has a negative attitude towards the state and government and proclaims that the state is 'at best, a necessary evil'. The reason for Classical Liberals being so anti-government is because they are far more libertarian than modern Liberals, and they place more emphasis on freedom. They do not see any way in which the state can exist without infringing on their freedoms but recognises the need for it to maintain law and order.

Lord Acton said " absolute power corrupts absolutely", he holds a very negative view of government which is shared by many other Libertarians. They feel that any government with political power will automatically defend the institution because it got them into power and will support the higher classes over the lower classes because they depend on them for political and financial support. Mill was a Libertarian who argued in 1859, " The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over anyone is to prevent harm to others", this portrays a belief in minimal government.

MacPherson went even further than this; he was a 'possessive individualist' who regarded the individual as " owing nothing to society" and therefore should not have to obey by the laws of the state and government. Modern Liberals however have looked at the state as positive and enabling, exercising an increasingly wide range of social and economic responsibilities. So we can come to the conclusion that modern liberals are less fearful of unchecked power and more willing for the government to play a more active role in our lives.

This new outlook came about with utilitarianism which advocates 'the greatest happiness for the greatest number. Furthermore the rise of the welfare state after the Beveridge Report in 1942 argues for greater state intervention to improve the lives of the disadvantaged. The pro-welfare state contrasts starkly with the view of a Classical Liberal, Spencer, who iterates that 'the drunkard in the gutter is exactly where he is supposed to be' and condemns government action to involve itself in the lives of others.

Followers of Social Darwinism would agree with this as they advocate 'the survival of the fittest' and that any attempt to help the weak would be a disservice to civilisation. Pluralists may also argue that when achieving a welfare state to improve the lives of the many, you are doing so at the cost of the rest of the population and their freedoms. Liberals across the centuries have always had a lot to say about the role of the state. For example, Montesquieu insists on the incorporation of institutional checks and balances to limit to authority of the state.

Rousseau proclaims direct democracy as the only fair way to rule and preserve our liberty simultaneously. Locke proclaims the existence of a social contract between the governed and the governing. To Locke the government is a purely representative body and we sustain the right to replace, by any means necessary, any government which is not appropriately representing the people. I agree with the statement completely when analysing the stance of the Classical Liberals but not so with the Modern Liberals. Modern Liberals have evolved past the suspicious and

negative view of the state and are much more willing to grant government intervention.

They have even toned down their emphasis on freedom, replacing it with the idea of positive liberty, that freedoms can be breached if it is for our own good, or the good of the majority. On the other hand, all of the beliefs within Classical liberal ideology can be traced back to a fear of unchecked power; need for constraints on the running of government, laissez-faire and free-trade policies. These in turn can be traced to a need for freedom. This relates back to my point at the beginning of this essay that power and liberty are fundamentally contradictory.