

Ideology is a set of ideas about human nature



Ideologies adapt according to changing social and political conditions and can even merge with, or adopt doctrines from, other ideologies. Liberalism as an ideology has undergone successive modifications since its inception some 300 years ago. In particular, Liberalism's view of the role of the state has changed since 1880 in response to the economic failings of its own 'Laissez faire' philosophy, but throughout Liberalism has retained its fundamental preoccupation with the freedom of the individual.

HUMAN NATURE: Fundamentally, Liberal thought is individualistic. It believes in the dignity, autonomy, rationality and self-development of each person. Over the years liberalism has stretched out to inform other ideologies and is sometimes portrayed as a meta-ideology for this reason. The idea that individuals merit respect as individuals, that human life is precious and deserving, has called for the abolition of slavery, the death penalty, torture, violence and manipulation of other people, and is primary to UN constitution, EU requirements and so forth. Individuals are self directing; they can make plans and choices, and as moral agents are able to shape their lives as they see fit. Liberals draw upon Romanticism for their concept of human beings as creatures whose destiny is to develop their powers to the maximum extent possible. That self-development remains an aspiration of great power. It is the only creed which appeals directly to the individual as an individual and not as a member of group, class or nation.

SOCIETY Liberalism is concerned with two set of relationships; between the individual and society, and between society and the State.

INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIETY In classical liberalism (c. 1760 - 1860), society is visualised as a collection of individuals; the individual is of primary focus and society is dimly perceived in the background. When Liberalism first emerged in the writings of Locke, Paine,

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Bentham and the two Mills (James, and John Stuart) it took as its major target the eradication of privilege in societies which had slavery and serfdom in which aristocracies and established churches were strongly entrenched. In such a context, Liberals demanded Civil liberty - the toleration of all creeds and the extension of freedom of conscience, expression and association, and for equality before the law irrespective of race, class or creed, and as such these demands were revolutionary in scope and impact. Liberalism appealed to the people who were very much aware that society was in fact composed of distinct groups and classes, and 'unequal rights'. Liberalism stood for the inclusion in the laws of a society of a set of rights which individuals are held to possess merely by virtue of their humanity. So, liberalism in effect wanted to unite all individuals as equals. In the 20th century, society has become more 'collectivist', more conscious of political responsibility for all its members, and also more aware of individuals as members of groups; which has influenced Liberalism. It has become the philosophy of the open, plural society - 'open', because there is widespread freedom of intellectual production and expression, and 'plural' because there is widespread freedom for groups to exist, put their points of view across, and live their own lives according to their own principles. SOCIETY AND STATE Liberalism has always been concerned with the quality and protection of the private life of the individual; central to the liberalist vision of a good society is a sphere of thought and action free from public interference. This concept is often described as 'negative liberty' - what we do not want the state to do to us, society should be the arena of freedom, of voluntary activity, of personal relationship; the state signifies the area of compulsion, force, involuntary activity and constraint. In the 20th century the state extended its

responsibilities into society, and liberals still worry about the intrusion into individual's rights and the invasion into all aspects of the individual's life and home. PROGRESS: In the liberalist view, societies prosper with the removal of restrictions upon individual enterprise in order to unleash the dynamism and innovation of individuals. However, the economic inefficiency and unfairness which arose under the liberalist 'Laissez faire' approach of the 19th century could no longer be defensible, when society undoubtedly became richer but share of national wealth increased in massive disproportion for the middle and upper classes to that of the working class who constituted one third of the population living on or near the poverty line. In this context, L. T. Hobhouse in his book 'Liberalism' (1911) was the first to point out that for government to undertake responsibility to provide directly for the poorer class and to take steps to improve the working of the market for labour, need not necessarily, as previously thought, undermine the initiative and sense of responsibility for their own welfare of individuals. Greater fairness could result in a more efficient society. Later liberal thinkers J. M. Keynes and W. H. Beveridge, agreed to this need to increase the scope of government without sapping individual initiative; to keep a balance between what was done for individuals and what they must still do for themselves. This attitude was typical of the way liberals redefined the meaning of social progress in the twentieth century, and anticipated by some half century the form of society based upon a 'mixed economy' which emerged after 1945. It was a society based upon the principle of equality of opportunity but not of equality. Its economic philosophy was that of Keynes whose academic work as an economist provided the framework and techniques on which government economic management could be directed. Keynes believed that

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the old doctrine of laissez faire should be discerned and that the state should provide a safety net of social security but within the workings of a capitalist economy; the state remaining completely divorced from industry and trade and preserving the scope for individual initiative and entrepreneurship.

William Beveridge in his report on 'Social insurance and allied services' (1942) proposed a scheme of social insurance to cover all classes of society and recommended a national health service, family allowances, an improved education system, better housing and the maintenance of employment. The state should provide the preconditions of a 'decent life' but only a basic subsistence minimum, as anything over and above the minimum should be left to the individual to provide themselves.

GOVERNMENTThe fundamental Liberal political idea is the idea of freedom. This concept has three aspects; freedom under the law, limited government, and government by consent. In essence it is a doctrine of limits, a theory of control of the power of

governments. This is because for Liberals, any government whatever its form, composition and goals may abuse its power, become arbitrary and even authoritarian.

FREEDOM UNDER THE LAWThe principle of freedom under the law is directed to securing a government of laws, not men; quelling the fear of being subject to the capricious power of another, and correspondingly expresses the desire to establish a set of objective external limits over everyone - the law. Where the law, a body of rules equally applicable to all, is sovereign, no one need fear the power of another.

Protection of the person is the role of the civil and criminal law. As Locke wrote; 'where there is no law, there is no freedom. For liberty is to be free from restraint and violence by others, which cannot be where there is no law'. **LIMITED GOVERNMENT**The idea of limited government, or constitutional

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freedom, is aimed at guaranteeing the liberty of individuals against their rulers and in the twentieth century Liberal political theory has focused increasingly on groups in society as a way of limiting the power of government. This is a pluralist approach to politics. GOVERNMENT BY CONSENT For liberals, government should be based upon individual consent, legitimated by free elections to produce representative bodies or parliaments which will then enact laws which individuals have assented. And since politics in the view of liberals is about the reconciliation of differences of opinion, government should be by discussion, no irreconcilable conflicts exist and the state should exist as a neutral agency whose role it is to carry out the majority view as policy. POLITICAL PARTICIPATION Liberalism aims to maximise political participation and favours political democracy, however, two streams of thought justify it - one associated with Thomas Paine, and the other with Jeremy Bentham. Paine argued that the possession of a vote is a natural right and the logical product of human equality. Bentham and the Utilitarians stressed that the vote is necessary for the defence of one's interests. The only way to ensure that government is in the general interest is to have a democratic system. Only in that way will government legislate, as Bentham put it, for 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number'.