

Liberalism to Die For

We are meeting this weekend to debate Vladimir Putin's claim that liberalism is obsolete. I must put my cards on the table straight away and admit that I am a fully-paid-up, card-carrying member of the Liberal Democrats – so you can probably anticipate how my presentation will go! But – of late – I have heard and read my party being described as the “Illiberal Undemocratic Party” – and this grieves and bewilders me. Is this a language problem, or has the party gone right off-message? To justify my faith in liberalism, I want to look more closely at its core values and suggest that there are three words which sum up liberalism

Liberte Egalite Fraternite.

Let's look at Liberty and Equality, which Francis Fukayama refers to as the twin principles of Western Liberal Democracy. It is clear, however, that they are not twins, in the realm of economics. There –they sit on opposite ends of a seesaw: the higher one side goes, the lower the other side falls. If all the citizens in the state have exactly equal shares in society's goods, there is little room for personal freedom. On the other, if individual freedom has no limits set, the strongest, the cleverest, the fittest would take everything, and the weak, disabled and unskilled would have freedom only to starve, freeze and die of preventable illness. So where should the limits be set, and why should the stronger give up some of their power to benefit the weaker?

Some cultures place a low value on individual freedom emphasising harmony within society, and within a community some individuals are prepared to sacrifice a degree of personal liberty in return for physical or economic security. Thomas Hobbes is the classic example. Other cultures value freedom – possibly to excess! I suggest that could be largely a matter of national culture or temperament. Undoubtedly this love of freedom is particularly strong in Britain, and in all the English-speaking nations who were once colonies, as well as the northern “Viking” states of Europe.

It was the British philosopher John Locke who inspired Thomas Jefferson with the familiar words: “All men are created equal”, and that they have unalienable natural rights to life liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Some of the colonists, however, had feared that freedom – independence from “England” – might come at too high a price and that life as an independent nation would involve years of financial hardship. Samuel Adams, one of the Founding Fathers had no respect for this attitude and poured scorn on it in a speech to the Second Continental Congress on 1st August 1776.

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If ye love wealth greater than liberty, the tranquillity of servitude greater than the animating contest for freedom, go home from us in peace. We seek not your counsel nor your arms. Crouch down and lick the hand that feeds you; May your chains sit lightly on you, and may posterity forget that ye were ever our countrymen.

The Scots– at least the SNP– still talk like this and have done for hundreds of years. In fact, 700 years ago (702 to be exact) the barons and people of Scotland sent a document to the Pope asking him to declare Robert the Bruce King of Scotland. It was the Declaration of Arbroath and contains this famous passage.

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As long as but a hundred of us remain alive, never will we, on any conditions be brought under English rule. It is in truth not for glory, nor riches, nor honours that we are fighting, but for freedom – for that alone, which no honest man gives up but with life itself.

This freedom is the freedom to make one’s own decisions, and for the nation to make its own decisions, without taking directions from an external, more powerful nation. Or, looking down to the family unit, for children to grow up and become the masters of their own fate, leaving the comfort of the family home, where someone else pays the bills, but makes the rules, and starting out on their own, making their own mistakes and paying for them, but living as free independent adults.

The story of Adam and Eve is an allegory about the passage from the innocence of childhood into adulthood, having to take responsibility for their choices.

In societies where harmony is the goal, children are educated from an early age to know and understand their place in society, and to obey rules set by authority, whether that is religion, the wisdom of ancestors or a strong ruler.

The thinkers of the Enlightenment – also known as the Scottish Enlightenment because of David Hume and Adam Smith – saw moral freedom as the coming of age of a rational individual. The Berliner Monatsschrift – believed to be Kant's favoured publication asked the question "Was ist Aufklaerung"? – What is Enlightenment? And published Kant's answer to the question in 1784.

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Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's own understanding without direction from another. This immaturity is self-incurred if its cause is not lack of understanding but lack of resolve and courage to use it without another's guidance. Sapere aude! Dare to know! That is the motto of the Enlightenment.

Kant's formulation of the moral law – that one should act as if the maxim of one's action should be law universal is known as the Universalisability test. but could be paraphrased simply as "Do as you would be done by". This added to his call to treat all rational beings, including oneself, as "ends in themselves" and never as a means to an end only, emphasises the common bond of humanity, and the equal worth of all individuals. This bond between human beings can be captured by the third word in the French motto – Fraternite. It could be translated as "brotherhood" or "empathy" or "fellowship" or "respect" for one's fellow human beings. This same word explains why the stronger should voluntarily relinquish some of their power, and why rational beings should be tolerant of differing beliefs.

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The optimum balance between liberty and equality is one of the central questions of John Rawls' work **A Theory of Justice** – the philosopher's book of the decade at the time it was published. He talks of ways in which one might distance oneself from one's own interests when designing a good society, as if through a Veil of ignorance, without knowing what place one would have in that society. The main difficulties with the Veil of Ignorance are a) that it is psychologically impossible to imagine oneself in a totally different situation in life and b) it is not in any sense empirically testable, so open to all manner of virtue-signalling

I suggest a couple of simple tests, which are, at least in principle, testable.

a) The architect's dilemma.

An architect is offered the job of designing a whole, new town, with houses to cater for different incomes and family sizes, The fee will be £1 billion. Wow what a job opportunity! But there is a catch: he must live for at least 320 days a year for five years in one of the properties in the town, to be chosen at random by lot, before the £1 billion is paid. Oh Dear! Not such a good job! His first reaction may be to refuse the offer – I would not leave my lovely Tudor Manor house and its beautiful grounds in the Oxfordshire countryside to live in one of the houses I've designed, especially as most of them will be cramped, no gardens, nowhere to park my Merc....

After some reflection he may conclude that a billion is worth a bit of sacrifice, AND he has it in his power to make sure that none of the houses/flats are unfit for humans to live in, even if it means there will be no room for enormous mansions. He will choose to reduce inequality.

b) The Diner's Choice

One hundred people are asked to subscribe £30 for a ticket to a pot-luck dinner. The £30 equal payment represents their equal value as human beings. When they get there, they select a ticket from the barrel by the door and are led to their place. Ten of them sit at a high table, and are served the best food, all extravagant delicacies, the finest wines, elaborate desserts. Twenty more sit a little lower down and enjoy a simpler but adequate meal with a glass of beer or fruit juice. Sixty are given a bowl of thin soup, some

may get a crust of bread and they are offered water. The last 10 get nothing, but must serve at the top table, hoping to be able to eat the scraps off the plates of the diners. This is the state of the world. This is an exercise in empathy. How many of the lucky ten can enjoy their food, when they see the deprivations of the angry crowd below them and the wretched hunger of those who serve them.

Is society getting better, more compassionate, less violent, less selfish?

Francis Fukuyama claimed, some thirty or so years ago that we are witnessing “the end of history as such: that is the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalisation of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government”. It has been described as one of the worst predictions in social science, but as he points out in later work, just because no society has actually reached that endpoint, it is still a worthy aim.

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Benjamin Franklin was openly pessimistic. He was a scientist (remember the kite and the key), and marvelled at the progress of science and technology, foreseeing further marvels to come, but saw no progress away from man’s inhumanity to man.

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Stephen Pinker is an optimist and makes a case for this in his work “The Better Angels of our Nature”, where he argues that humans are evolving morally, to be less violent, and more compassionate.

Now to the question of what the is best form of government – widely believed today in the West to be democracy. Let’s take a very brief glance at the work of those two privileged white males, who set the agenda for political debate for the following two millennia.

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Plato was no friend to democracy, which he thought to be the worst form of government. His ideal state was composed of three layers the rulers, the

administrators, specifically the army and the artisans, bakers, builders, farmers etc. The two other classes were to take their orders from the rulers.

This was rule by an elite class, but not a plutocracy – the guardians were not to own any property at all and live a simple life. It thus represents perhaps the best kind of oligarchy. Plato's reasoning was that the guardians are best placed to govern, as they know what is best for the others, as all their years of study of mathematics and philosophy has made them wise.

Aristotle

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Takes a different view, and considers three possibilities Monarchy, Oligarchy and Democracy. They all have defects, but democracy has the fewest. Of all the differences between men, the difference between the rich and the poor is only one of real importance. Poverty is the cause of the defects of democracy, and the reason why democracy will not work at all where the gap between rich and poor is too great. This is because the angry "have-nots" will vote to take away the property of the few, which Aristotle feels is unjust. This dilemma can be resolved either by reducing inequality, or by limiting democracy. Aristotle chose the first and talks of setting up what we would recognise as a rudimentary welfare state, giving as an example the provision of free communal meals, paid for out of public funds. The same public funds could give grants to the poor to enable them to set up in trade or farming, and, if possible, allow them to buy land for this purpose. Well, you can see where this is going

The broad division into three types of government is still recognizable today. There are states ruled by a single person, whether a king, or a dictator or even a tyrant, oligarchies, where all the power is vested in an elite minority, or democracies, where all the population is involved in guiding the laws.

I hope it is clear from what I have said above that I believe that a free society, of tolerant, compassionate and respectful citizens needs to be a democracy. Virtually no-one in the west claims that democracy is a bad form of government, and yet – it is everywhere under attack.

Chomsky feels that democracy is virtually dead in America and was under attack right from the beginning. He points out in the film “Requiem for the American Dream” that James Madison, the main architect of the Constitution, chose the other alternative from Aristotle, choosing to reduce democracy rather than reduce inequality.

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In England at this day, if elections were open to all classes of people, the property of the landed proprietors would be insecure. An agrarian law would soon take place. Landholders ought to have a share in the government. They ought to be so constituted as to protect the minority of the opulent against the majority.

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Thomas Jefferson remarked (in a letter to William Short dated January 8th 1825): that

“Men, according to their constitutions, and the circumstances in which they are placed, differ honestly in opinion. Some are Whigs, liberals, democrats – call them what you please. The others are Tories, serviles, aristocrats etc. The latter fear the people and wish to transfer all power to the upper classes of society. The former consider the people as the safest depository of power in the ultimate. They cherish them therefore and wish to leave in them all the powers to the exercise of which they are competent. This is the division of sentiment now existing in the US.”

This appears to be the situation in the UK – two factions, (I would call them Tories and non-Tories) one having the interests of the ruling elite at heart, the other of the “demos” . The voters can choose democratically, while the mechanics of democracy is being undermined, and the public do not notice that control is being passed to the elite. Who are the elite today? The Media Moguls, The BBC and the mainstream press, the internet controllers of social media. the CEOs of large corporations, the financial institutions, billionaires, academics, in other words, the great and the good, who know best how

things should be done. Democracy is moderated, so that the damage it could cause can be neutralised, by limiting the choice the voter can make to two unpalatable alternatives, and by encouraging divisions in society, so that there are so many different “identity groups”, there is little chance of a consensus.

The state to which democracy had been undermined was brought under the spotlight in 2016, when David Cameron made the disastrous error of offering a referendum on the EU. This led to a split down the middle – the votes for each side were almost equal, so guaranteeing that the losing side would be aggrieved, and the resulting division has caused bitterness in the nation which will take a long time to heal. It is not a question of which side was right – they were both right according to their own interests – like the Scots in The Declaration of Arbroath, or the colonists in America, some felt that a few years of financial hardship was a price worth paying in exchange for gaining the freedom to run one’s own affairs. Others felt that a loss of national sovereignty was a small price to pay for all the advantages gained in being in the Union.

Apart from the general moaning about petty irritations, like excessive regulations about the straightness of cucumbers, and whether you could buy your meat by the pound rather than the Kilo, there had been no general unrest amongst the public, that suggested they wanted to leave the EU. If Cameron had thought there was a remote chance that the vote would be that close, he should not have called for a referendum, without at least setting the bar for change at 60% or higher. which is reasonable for a major constitutional change. But you cannot change the rules after the match. All the polling had suggested the win for remain was guaranteed – but then came the shock result.

The reaction of the losers was more than disappointment and worry – it was anger. Who were all these voters that the pollsters seemed to have missed? And how dare they vote against the advice of the elite? If this is democracy, it will have to be stopped.

A Manchester Professor suggested that Tony Blair was to blame! He had alienated the old labour heartland in the north – people who had voted labour for generations but could not identify with the very right-wing party called NEW Labour, had simply stopped voting. When a chance came up to take part in a ballot where every vote counted, they went to the polls, some of them for the first time in 40 years.

A Serbian friend of mine sent me an interesting article, written by a Serbian journalist, Srdja Trifcovic shortly after the result, and I was amazed that a “foreigner” (if you pardon the expression!) could have such insight into UK politics. When I went back for a second look, I found it had been banned from the Internet, the reason being that it contained “violence, repression, sedition and gore”! They let me have another look, so I took the precaution of photographing the screen, in case they removed it again. I am reproducing it here, so you can all see what Google did not want you to see.

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The outcome of the United Kingdom’s EU referendum on June 23rd stunned the London-based elite class. It laid bare the deep chasm between Britain’s political and media machine, and the alienated, angry and disillusioned majority of “left-behind” citizens. Thanks to David Cameron’s miscalculations, hoi polloi used the opportunity to express their abiding dislike not only of the European Union and all its works, but also of the post-national metropolitan elite class which dominates the political process and media discourse in Britain (as it does in every major Western Country). That class were over-whelming pro-EU – not least because close to a million of its members have cottages in Languedoc, villas in Umbria etc.

The vote, he continues, can be seen as a plebiscite on the electoral system per se.

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The elite class does not accept defeat, however, because it subscribes to the Bolshevik principle that the march of progressive humanity – of which it is the avant-garde – cannot be stopped by a mere exercise in “democracy”.

Former Prime Minister Tony Blair – a post-human Briton par excellence – thus moans that the 48% who voted to remain feel “disenfranchised”. He and his ilk across the political spectrum are absolutely livid that yobs, racists and semi-literates from crappy northern towns have dared to defy their wisdom and horrified by the fact (that IDIOT Cameron!) that the Untermensch scum were given the opportunity in the first place. That mistake must be rectified!

I haven’t heard anyone referring openly to “Untermensch scum”, though Professor A.C. Grayling, a well-respected philosopher, did refer to leave politicians as “vermin”, which is possibly even worse. “[May, Davis, Fox Johnson – The US and the UK is in the hands of political vermin.](#)”

Giles Fraser, reviewing Grayling’s book “Democracy in Crisis” criticises Grayling’s view that “clever people” should have more say in the running of the country. “It really does take some monumental ego to think that not being agreed with constitutes a crisis for the whole of democracy.”

So now it is all out in the open: democracy is under sustained attack, and who knows whether it will survive. On its survival, however, depend all those Enlightenment values which underpin Liberalism.

I want to end in a positive note by talking of the great the wonderful Leonard Cohen. He was a songwriter, a poet, who could capture in a few words, ideas which philosophers struggle to express in chapters. He saw that the quest for perfection is fruitless and that it is through the cracks, flaws and faults that progress is made.

“Ring the bells that still can ring

Forget your perfect offering

There is a crack in everything

That’s how the light gets in”

Leonard died on the 7th of November 2016.

On the 9th of November Donald Trump won the presidential election. The next day I was watching Laura Kuensberg interviewing Henry Kissinger on

the BBC, when some maverick sound engineer started playing Leonard's possibly best song, Democracy in the background. (If you have not heard it, and I am cut off, please look it up on Youtube.)

He obviously didn't write it for Trump's election, but the sound engineer must have thought that Trump was the cracked flawed vessel which would bring in real democracy to the USA

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(Depending on time – a few more verses)

From the wars against disorder

From the sirens night and day

From the fires of the homeless

From the ashes of the gay

DEMOCRACY is coming to the USA

It's coming through a crack in the wall

On a visionary flood of alcohol

It's coming through a hole in the air

From those nights in Tiananmen Square

(It's coming from the unemployed in the Rust Belt)

It's coming from the silence

On the dock on the bay

From the brave, the bold,

The battered heart of Chevrolet

Democracy is coming to the USA

It's coming to America first

The cradle of the best and the worst.

It's here they have the range, and machinery for change,

and here they have the spiritual thirst

I'm stubborn as those garbage bags which time cannot decay

I'm junk but I am holding up this little wild bouquet

Democracy is coming

To the USA

Can democracy survive in the UK? Or will the self-appointed elite succeed in silencing the voices of the many? Like Leonard Cohen I believe there is hope, and that it's always worth fighting for.