

## SLIDE 1

### LIBERALISM? IF NOT, THEN WHAT?

Good morning. Can you all hear me?

My talk today falls into three parts

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I The authorised version of Liberalism

II Some unauthorised [?] versions

III The competition if not Liberalism, then what?

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## SLIDE 4

I take my concept of Liberalism from its first great proponent: John Stuart Mill.

All quotes are from Mill unless otherwise attributed

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He said *The only freedom which deserves the name is that of pursuing our own good, in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs, or impede their efforts to obtain it.*

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*The only part of the conduct of any one, for which he is amenable to society, is that which concerns others. In the part which merely concerns himself, his independence is, of right, absolute. And also*

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*The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others.*

Now Mill wrote a whole book about it, so a few qualifying remarks here are in order.

First, *whose* liberty is thus proclaimed?

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Do not be led astray by the male pronouns: Mill was not a chauvinist and indeed championed the equality of men and women.

Let us observe the classical distinction – Freedom *for*, and Freedom *from*

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**On Freedom For** he did expressly exclude children – while accepting that the boundary line was cultural

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And note ‘civilised community’

he expressly excluded ‘barbarians’

and indeed approved the principle of forcing them to become ‘civilised’ like it or not

I am not arguing in favour of this part of his principle

But there seem to be no such exclusions from the category of ‘others’ who are to be whose welfare and liberty **does** justify the use of power. All are to be Free **from** harm

So although he appears to rule out the use of executive or legal power to prevent say addicts or to persons of unsound mind from harming themselves

His doctrine would fully support the use of power over those who supply addicts or abuse persons of unsound mind

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Or abuse children or barbarians for that matter. Or even other animals

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*The reasons for legal intervention in favour of children, apply not less strongly to the case of those unfortunate slaves and victims of the most brutal part of mankind, the lower animals.*

The principle itself leaves room for debate about what constitutes 'harm' – but it must include depriving anyone of freedom of thought or of speech or of action.

And of course no rules about the sort of or amount of power which will be justified in preventing or limiting harm – some sort of proportion is implied but the application is open for discussion.

As it should be: the principle is not about the use of power. It is about the freedom of each person from the power of others on condition they respect others

Surely a social contract sort of principle.

It is possible to work out some corollaries. So the principle of Liberalism entails Government by consent or democracy

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But it does not of itself legitimise democracy

Democracies can be oppressive. Majorities can suppress the freedom of minorities and

*If all mankind minus one were of one opinion, and only one person were of the contrary opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person, than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind.*

Likewise it implies the rule of law; but justifies only those laws which fall within the principle

8 minutes

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## II Some unauthorized versions

And mostly of course Liberalism is intrinsically and entirely free of any theories about what people should think or how they should behave. It would indeed have been self contradictory to proclaim freedom of thought word and deed and then tell people how to use it.

So I simply cannot recognize the features singled out for criticism in several of the other talks for this event.

Ludwig Auer thinks that it has something to do with a market economy, individualistic freedom from each other and individualistic competition for advantages,

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But Mill does not

*I am not charmed with the ideal of life held out by those who think that the normal state of human beings is that of struggling to get on—that the trampling, crushing, elbowing, and treading on each other's heels. . . are . .*

*anything but the disagreeable symptoms of one of the phases of industrial progress.*

And he looks forward to producer coops

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*The form of association, however, which if mankind continue to improve, must be expected in the end to predominate, is . . . the association of the labourers themselves on terms of equality, collectively owning the capital with which they carry on their operations, and working under managers elected and removable by themselves*

Barry King likewise reckons that Liberalism is about wealth creation.

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But Mill does not go for Wealth Creation

*If the earth must lose that great portion of its pleasantness—which it owes to things that the unlimited increase of wealth and population would extirpate from it—I sincerely hope, for the sake of posterity, that we humans will be content to be stationary,*

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Edward Hadas proposes to critique the ideas of L T Hobhouse. By all means. Although I have to say that I goggle at the thought of Attlee and Bevan and Beveridge as ‘Hegelian dreamers’ The Welfare State they set up still resists Tory efforts to dismantle it.

Sam Livy talks of a liberal hegemony as a foreign policy objective. I am not sure what he is talking about but I don’t see what it has to do with Liberalism

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and for the record, Mill is ready for war

*War is an ugly thing, but not the ugliest of things: the decayed and degraded state of moral and patriotic feeling which thinks that nothing is worth a war, is much worse.*

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Greg Gauthier reckons that Liberalism is a *failed* attempt to answer the question of The One and the Many . Well, certainly a Liberal reckons the individual as the fundamental unit of society. As I write this I have to wait to see what collectives and how defined Mr Gauthier reckons as potentially fundamental units and in what way he reckons Liberalism has failed. I should for myself say that One Man, One Vote, - or One Person One Vote - seems to have stood the test of time and that schemes which depend on collective voting – such as our Constituency method of choosing a government, and Labour’s trade union votes for choosing a party leader – are weaknesses. And the most thorough nominal collectives, like the Communist parties of USSR and of China, seem to operate as oppressors even of their own members.

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At any rate Mill is not into straddling.

*Whatever crushes individuality is despotism*

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IN effect it seems to me that several speakers have taken the opportunity to sound off against features of today’s world that they disapprove of by attributing them to an otherwise undefined ‘Liberalism’

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I hope I have not done these speakers an injustice but I had to base my remarks on their printed abstracts SLIDE 24

. On this basis they seem to me to make a fundamental mistake

It is not just that Liberalism does not entail these tendencies, but that the whole point of it is that it *should* entail none. The Liberal wants you and me to be free to think and speak and act in support of *or* against these or any other prescriptions.

So along with Barbara Wainwright, David Burrig and Sam Livy, I rest my case on the authorized version of Liberalism

18 minutes

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III Now Mill himself obviously had arguments in favour of his principle; and the main one seems to have been the impossibility of final certainty in judging any proposition. So freedom especially of speech was the guarantee that what would come to seem the better or the stronger case was never suppressed.

My own case is related but slightly different in emphasis. It is a question. Who would you prefer to decide how you should speak and act – yourself or some other party?

There are several candidates – notably priests, princes, despots and dictators and political bosses and army chiefs. Not to mention big business.

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Priests have been at it a long time – it is almost their *raison d'être*. We in the western world have only recently escaped torture to find out heresy; and burnings for it once found. Over one in six people world wide belong to the Roman church whose doctrines are not to be challenged and whose leader is infallible. And outside of that, it is still religious groups and sects who hope to lay down the law for everybody especially in matters of sexual behaviour. Prurience and priesthood seem to go together

But Christian priests are relatively modest these days compared with Muslim priests, laying down the law or fatwah as it may be to nearly a quarter of the world population.

Indeed we in the western world are perhaps lucky in that Christianity began within an established state system and has usually operated within it ; whereas Islam preceded the states which sprang from it and still exerts a priority.

However I am not going to suggest that either or any religion is better. Of course a Liberal may choose to adopt any religion. But the priests are not satisfied with volunteers and I just want to ask you if you personally want your beliefs, your speech and your actions to be chosen for you without your consent by the spokespersons of some supernatural being.

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Princes are also old hands at the control business. Their power has recently faded compared with that of priests,

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but they are of course still in business in Arabia. There the sheikh's word is still law.

Mostly however they have been superseded by dictators and political bosses: same autocracy just not based on family.

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And here we in the western world have little to be proud of. Hitler and Mussolini only three generations ago. Franco and Salazar only two, Tito less. The USA has suffered from the Presidency of Trump, apparently willing to unleash force on Congress. And of course China

and Russia are still ruled by political bosses – forget your freedoms if you live in either of those.

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Or of course Generals

But before we in the west congratulate ourselves too readily on our freedom,

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let us not forget the power of big business, exerted as it is through our politicians and our press. As an electorate we may think we get to choose, but in effect we only get to choose between the options as presented to us by politicians and press. And it is seldom that they offer any choices opposed by big business. So we in the UK no longer have any sort of socialist party to vote for. And we are well off compared with the USA and even the USA is well off compared with Italy, where nobody bothers to pretend that politics is anything but a branch of business.

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And there was Trump of course

But all this does not mean that Liberalism is *obsolete*. It means that it is abhorred by just those powers which would like to make your choices for you. It is suppressed in most of the world today, and is under pressure even in the West. The very nature of the hostility to it and of the alternatives to it makes Liberalism not obsolete but more precious than ever.

Well , of course as a Liberal, I accept your right to hand over your freedom of choice to others. But I want to ask you seriously whether you want to exercise that right and if so which of the competing powers *you* prefer to do your choosing for you.

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Hands up for Liberalism then?

But I needn't bother to ask you who you'd prefer to make your choices for you  
*They're* not bothered

It's not Hands up for Priests or dictators

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Its just Hands Up and Hand over