



# LIBERTARIAN ALLIANCES: WHO LIBERTARIANS SHOULD AND SHOULD NOT CONSORT WITH, AND THE NEED BOTH TO RANK AND TO RATE THEM

NIGEL MEEK



## REAL-WORLD POLITICS AND THE REQUIREMENT THAT LIBERTARIANS TAKE A HARD LOOK AT THEIR ASSOCIATES

During the panel session at the end of the Liberty '99 conference held in London in October, the subject of alliances was raised and discussed by panellists and conference attendees. I was particularly struck by a comment from the Libertarian Alliance's Director, Dr Chris R. Tame, that these days other groups were actively seeking out the Libertarian Alliance's support rather than the other way around.

In any event, whether we seek or are sought, since we are not naive enough to think that we can always go it alone, basking all the while in our hermetically-sealed ideological purity, it is likely to be true that, from time to time, we are obliged to work with other groups and individuals who are not themselves fully libertarian as we would understand the term. There are a great many people out there, between them professing every conceivable belief, and some of them will be rather more to our liking than others. However, as much as it would be nice to be able to deploy a simple dichotomous description of each of these as either, to use the Thatcherite terminology, 'one of us' or 'not one of us', with both of them being homogenous groups, it is unfortunately a little more complicated than this. Nonetheless, it does seem a good idea to at least make the attempt to categorise those that one might be about to get into bed with, and therefore have some guide as to whether it is actually safe to do so.

Before I continue, I do want to make it quite clear what I am discussing, and in particular what I am *not* discussing. The primary aim of this essay is to analyse those that libertarians may think about associating with in an 'activist' manner. I

am not suggesting that libertarians should analyse everyone that they come into contact with in their everyday — as opposed to their political — lives, and only then subsequently decide whether or not to associate with them. This would be plainly absurd.

Additionally, although I suggest below that I am sceptical about the efficiency of deliberate, wide-scale, one-to-one political converting, if one finds oneself in the company of someone with different views, even those that might place them in the group that I describe below as Outright Enemies, and one believes that one's rhetorical abilities outweigh the degree of tenacity with which the other person adheres to his or her views, then most certainly give it a go and the best of luck.

## THE GOOD, BAD, AND THE APPARENTLY IRRELEVANT

I would suggest that people or organisations *qua* their ideological views compared to libertarianism can be roughly segmented into six categories, some of which we can fairly freely do business with, others that we should be wary of, and still others that we should not touch with a barge-pole.

I concede at the outset that in practice it is undoubtedly true that the borders between these categories are often blurred and porous: i.e. they are not always easy to spot in the first case, and furthermore that even subtle shifts in belief can cause someone to shuttle back and forth between them, both of these applying particularly to marginal cases.

A further difficulty is that the same individual might at various times be encountered within different political domains and hence located within different categories.



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www.libertarian.co.uk email: admin@libertarian.co.uk

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Nigel Meek graduated as a mature student with a BSc Psychology in 1996, followed by an MA Applied Social and Market Research in 1998. He has most recently worked in the market research industry and the support side of further education.

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

FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY



### 1A: Libertarian Fundamentalists

### 1B: Libertarian Adherents

It is arguable that these are in reality two entirely separate groups, and certainly in the more arcane ‘angels on a pin-head’ discussions that one comes across from time to time they are so treated. However, I think that it might be somewhat unhelpful to make too much of the distinction, and not only because by doing so it would make the small number of genuine libertarians seem even smaller.

The 1A group are, unsurprisingly, wholehearted, true-believer libertarians. This is not a ‘What is Libertarianism?’ essay, but I would suggest that it encompasses those who advocate, at least as some ultimate objective, a no-state, voluntaristic world of complete individual liberty subject to the standard ‘neither force nor fraud’ proviso.

I wish to reiterate the point that many libertarians make (e.g. Meek, 1999[a]: 2) that this says nothing about what individuals may choose to do with this freedom: it is most certainly *not* a prohibition on even the most extreme forms of *voluntary* altruism. This is why I tend to eschew the term ‘anarcho-capitalism’ as it falsely suggests certain economic relations as being axiomatic to libertarianism: capitalism is libertarian, it is *not* libertarianism. As those acquainted with me will know, this is one of my hobby-horses. Although I personally do not doubt the superior economic efficiency of capitalism over more collectivist forms of economics, the at least implicit equation of libertarianism and capitalism has, I believe, fostered a considerable amount of ‘consumer resistance’ amongst potential recruits who have a self-image as belonging to the ‘left’.

The 1B group contains those who, whilst not fully in agreement with the above criteria, come so close to it in almost all important respects that one can still consider them to be genuine libertarians. Into this subgroup would certainly fall minarchist classical liberals, and whilst I think that few readers would disagree with the inclusion of this group, more contentiously — both for others and I suspect for the members of this group themselves — I *might* also place here genuine individualist anarchists of the sort exemplified by the Boston Anarchist Drinking Brigade, although others would perhaps place them in category 2 below.

Honesty requires me to say that, perhaps due to faintheartedness, most of the time I probably fall into the 1B category myself.

### 2: Semi-Libertarians or Respected Friends

This group comprises those who hold genuinely libertarian views on one or more issues of importance, and who are ‘tolerable’ from a libertarian perspective on others, i.e. they are not actively authoritarian. An example would be the ‘better’ sort of free-market conservative who may not be wildly keen on the ‘drugs and kinky sex’ side of libertarianism’s overall agenda, but who do not get overly heated up about it either and in truth simply prefer not to think about it; i.e. those areas in which they hold to non-libertarian views are not for them particularly ‘activist’ areas.

It also includes, and this is something rather different, single-issue groups where there appears to be no attempt on the part of its members to use it to promote views other than the single-issue that defines the group, even if in general they have views apparently hostile to libertarianism on other subjects. A group which has the most cordial relations with

the Libertarian Alliance and which seems a good example of this type is Feminists Against Censorship (FAC). FAC is a fairly avowedly ‘leftist’ group set up many years ago primarily to counter the prevailing puritanism and censorial nature of contemporary ‘left’ feminism. They have done excellent work and books written by its members are to be highly recommended. The point is that, by-and-large, in their *external* communications and activities at least they stick to this limited agenda; of course, what FAC’s members say about other matters during their private conversations with each other is entirely a matter for themselves.

### 3: Moderates

On the face of it this would seem to be the most irrelevant group. Probably the broad mass of people including ‘mainstream’ politicians, as individuals they will rarely consciously hold strong views on any subject except perhaps on something very particular and, in the more general scheme of things, minor. Where an organised campaigning body is involved it will most likely involve some ‘apolitical’ issue such as — and I say this not by way of ridicule — the church steeple restoration fund at a local level or some apparently reputable national or international charity on a wider scale.

However, I would suggest that, whilst they are never likely to be our active and conscious allies, they are in fact more important than they might appear at first sight. First, just because they *are* ‘moderates’. Those of us who have had the good fortune to be born and grow up in the post-war liberal democracies of the West would do well to realise that this has been substantially because this group never stopped being moderates: they have rejected decidedly authoritarian political creeds in a way that, for example, large numbers of Germans at the end of the Weimar Republic who voted for and/or joined the Nazis or the Communists (or both in turn) did not. To be sure, it means that have also to-date rejected libertarianism, but things could have been an awful lot worse. We in the West live in a time and place of considerable liberty and material comfort; if nothing else, it is one in which we are fairly free to discuss and disseminate our ideas. We should ensure that our activities do nothing to endanger this situation.

The second reason why this group and our relations with them are important is in some ways the mirror image of the preceding point. From time to time, perhaps due to some ‘moral panic’, they *can* be raised up to excitement, albeit probably only briefly and as long as the media expend an enormous amount of energy into whipping up whatever campaign it is. It is unlikely that anything radical and over-arching comes from such events, but the incrementalism involved can be a source of both hope and fear for libertarians. Hope, because from time-to-time the ‘fair-minded sensibilities’ of the moderate masses may become outraged at some particularly appalling and unjust (usually government or state-derived) specific occurrence. Fear, because they are however probably even more likely to become worried about something untoward that has happened and, since they tend to be of a nervous and short-termist disposition, reflexively call for ‘controlling’ rather than ‘liberalising’ measures to ensure that ‘it’ does not happen again.

Nowadays I tend to take an elitist view of politics; time spent on evangelising *directly* to the general population is probably time wasted. Nonetheless, movement of the ideo-

logical centre of gravity of this broad mass of moderates often has a tremendous impact on the nature of political debate: ideas previously regarded as barmy and fit only to be rejected out-of-hand by all right-thinking people become the staple fare of serious consideration and discussion. As such this group is important to the long term prospects of libertarianism — and I am eschewing here some apocalyptic or revolutionary notion about how libertarianism will ‘come about’ — but, as has been argued almost since the Libertarian Alliance first started publishing (Libertarian Alliance, 1981), we need to look at more efficient ways of communicating with and influencing them than standing outside of railway stations stuffing grubby A5 leaflets into their unwilling hands.

#### 4: Dubious Allies

This group consists of those who share with libertarians views on one or more important issues, but who also *actively* adhere to anti-libertarian views on others, this feature of activism being the key differentiation from some that might fall into category 2. (Although how one defines ‘active’ for this purpose can be a vexed question. In any event, there are a number of individuals, known to many subscribers to the Libertarian Alliance, who I suspect I would place into either category 2 or 4 depending upon the contents of the last conversation that I had with them.)

Take for example, and no doubt it says something about the political origins of myself and many other libertarians, the association that there often seems to be with some distinctly odd conservatives because of shared views regarding (say) the welfare state, the EU (not in all cases, of course), and freedom of speech as it pertains to (say) race relations. (And reiterating the comment that I made above from a slightly different perspective, it certainly seems true that libertarians are more likely to be found in the company of ‘right-conservatives’ than ‘left-liberals’.) But look a bit deeper — or hang around in the bar after a speech when the beer is flowing and they think that they are amongst friends — and some decidedly worrying views start to surface.

To give a concrete example of this type, I am writing with a copy of issue 25 of the journal *Right Now!* beside me. It is worth noting that I have located within it in one context or another the names of no less than four Libertarian Alliance contributors. Whilst of course the journal formally separates itself from opinions in signed articles by the many different authors (as does the Libertarian Alliance), it manages to combine in its pages an interesting piece on ‘equal-opportunities’ with some appalling comments on homosexuality.

However, even if libertarians should be rather more assertive in noting disagreements when they occur and not just to nod politely, I still suggest that this is the last milieu that libertarians may operate in without feeling that they are amongst intractable enemies. But it *is* an arena to play in with circumspection.

By the way, and I volunteer this just as a parenthetical thought, I would submit as an hypothesis the possibility that the number of people who *really* hold to definitely libertarian views on core areas of ideological consideration whilst simultaneously holding to definitely authoritarian views on others may be fairly small. In short, I tend to agree with a generalised version of David Nolan’s contention (1971: 6-7) that ideological opinions on apparently different subjects are,

in practice if not in principle, not wholly independent of each other.

#### 5: ‘The Enemy Of My Enemy Is My Friend’

Of all the categories under discussion, this is probably the most ideologically distant one that nonetheless libertarians seem fairly frequently to associate with, although as I suggested above I am not convinced that we should do. Unlike the previous group, any association is based upon the fact that they may have views about something which libertarians also have, but that the derivation of these views is very different.

The reason why they are so dangerous or worrisome is three-fold. First, and which is antecedent to forming any association, is that the perceived necessity to form such allegiances may well speak volumes for the state of things externally: the storm must be very bad indeed to seek refuge in such an uninviting port. In such times we should not let desperation suspend our practical judgement or ethical standards.

Second, that our enemies can use such allegiances to discredit us to an even greater degree than they might regarding the previous category, often with very real justification. I give some examples below of where I think that this has been self-evidently true.

Third, by allying ourselves with them, there is always the possibility of our energies being used to further those parts of this group’s overall agenda very definitely not to our liking. Indeed, I would suggest that this *possibility* is perhaps even a *probability* if one accepts that they are likely to be more ruthless and/or scheming than us: anecdotally it would seem true that libertarians tend not to be natural plotters.

By way of illustration, I am drawn to the association between libertarians and various non-libertarian political groups during the dark days when the Soviet Union cast its shadow over the free-ish world and when Marxist-inspired socialism was a very real threat. There is no doubt that, from a libertarian perspective, fighting authoritarian international socialism was and is ‘a good thing’; however, this sometimes resulted in championing the existence and/or ignoring or minimising the activities of odious regimes and would-be regimes such as South American death-squads, apartheid-era South Africa, and Islamic fundamentalists in Afghanistan.

I am not suggesting that libertarians in the 1970s and 1980s willingly and knowingly embraced the values of torture and mass-murder, racism, or authoritarian superstitionism, but that nonetheless passive and sometimes active support was given to those who *did*.

In any case, and to spell out what I meant at the beginning of the discussion of this category, it is noticeable from the examples given that there is a strong tendency for any collaboration between libertarians and such groups to be on the basis, not of shared *enthusiasms*, but of shared *antagonisms* towards something else, in the examples above usually authoritarian socialism or Marxism: a striking warning of the dangers of oppositionalism absent of any positive policy.

#### 6: Outright Enemies

After the dangers and difficulties and dilemmas presented by some of the above, this is apparently the easiest group to

identify and avoid. They consist of those who hold to views which are along just about every conceivable dimension of ideology and values antipathetic to libertarianism. Examples are obvious and sadly numerous: Marxists, national socialists, Deep Greens, Islamic fundamentalists, *et al.*

But no, I have not forgotten what I wrote in the preceding section regarding the last-enumerated group, Islamic fundamentalists (and see Flew, 1995), for now I come to what I believe to be the most important point of this essay: the problems that can be caused by taking a highly relativistic view of things.

In social research two ways are often used to analyse individual and aggregate values: by either ranking or rating them, both of which have advantages and disadvantages (Inglehart, 1997: 114-117). To explain: one can either measure something relative to all the other options available which necessarily means that the score assigned to any one item is to a degree dependent on that given to others (ranking); or one can measure something in absolute terms as a discrete item independent of any score that might be assigned to anything else (rating). It is my contention that libertarians have been too often guilty of using *solely* essentially a ranking system when analysing other people and groups. This meant that, during the 1970s and 1980, this led to libertarians putting Marxism and the Soviet Union at a uniquely isolated position at the top of their hate-list and then ranking everyone else according to their (these others') views of same. Accordingly, Islamic fundamentalism (and the others that I noted previously) was seen to oppose Marxism and the Soviet Union, therefore it was ranked lower on the hate-list, and therefore it was supported in its struggles.

In short, libertarians have been too ready to make comparative, ranking judgements when a more absolutist rating would suggest rather strongly that many of these groups must be regarded as libertarianism's enemies: groups that by any such analysis we should be fighting against and not supporting.

At this point it will be objected that we cannot always afford to be too prissy in choosing our friends since often the need is great indeed. I fully agree. The point that I am making, however, is that even where we can say that one group is *relatively* better than the other, there must be some *absolute* point — and I do not claim to know exactly where it is — at which the supposedly better group is still so vile as to render it untouchable. Consider if, at the next general election, we were faced with a straightforward choice between two parties, one of which proposed to solve Britain's problems by gassing all the Jews, and another which instead proposed gassing all the Jews and privatising the welfare state. Described in such stark terms, surely even the most fanatical opponent of state welfare would not support the latter party? But I am suggesting that sort of thing *is* what happened in the past: just consider the human rights records of many of those countries or regions deemed to be 'Islamic'.

There are times when opting out is the only honourable course of action, since all positive engagement must effectively be on the side of Wrong whichever positive option is chosen.

(Lest anyone think that I am being rather sanctimonious about such 'errors of judgement' — as we have recently learned to say — on the part of *others*, I spent much of the 1980s cheering on the Red Army in its wanderings around

Afghanistan and was decidedly upset when it finally admitted defeat. But readers may be less surprised about this if I note too both the atheism that I have adhered to since childhood and my paid-up membership of a pro-Israeli organisation.)

## NEW TIMES AND NEW DANGERS

My final point is that this may occur again, in ways that we cannot yet conceive. Much of the specific historical problem that I focussed on above was based upon, not only the real threat of Marxism and the existence of a militarily powerful state to back it up, but also in part due to the then intellectual obsession with economic issues — undoubtedly the prime ideological cleavage at the time (Cable, 1994: 1) — often at the cost of not looking at anything else (Meek, 1999[b]).

*That*, however, was *then*, and that particular war seems to have been won by us, at least in part. But this is to assume too much an 'end of history' view of things. The classic cleavage centring on economics and class is diminishing in relative importance, only to be replaced by others such as identity (Cable, 1994) and Materialism-Postmaterialism (Inglehart, 1997). We can only speculate for now what apparently fundamental issues might cause us to man the intellectual barricades as we once did against Marxism; but this time, as well as observing those on the other side of the barbed wire, we need to have a very hard look at those standing next to us.

We should be clear: 'thus far and no further' will we compromise our ideals in the name of political pragmatism.

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