

Liberalism

Anatomy of an idea

Feb 5th 2009

From *The Economist* print edition

Barack Obama shuns the L-word. But his speeches brim with liberal ideas and ideals. What is it about the doctrine that dare not speak its name?



Bridgeman Art Library

AUTHORS who defend liberalism must often struggle just to get the word out without facing incomprehension or abuse—even today. To the left, particularly in Europe, liberalism means the free-market dogma of clever simpletons who created the present financial mess. The American right's complaint is quite different. Forget that Hamilton, Jefferson and Madison fathered liberalism in the United States. For nigh on 30 years conservative Republicans persuaded American voters that liberals were godless, amoral, tax-happy hypocrites.

Intellectually, little of either charge makes sense. Twinned with "democracy", as in what the West stood up for during the cold war,

“liberal” was a term of pride. Since communism failed, the case for liberal democracy has only strengthened. Think of outstanding alternatives: illiberal Russia, undemocratic China, populist Venezuela, theocratic Iran.

Odder still, put this question to people who live, or would like to live, in a liberal democracy: “Which of the following values do you espouse—personal freedom, rule of law, active but accountable government, free but responsible markets, mutual toleration and equal concern for all?” It is a fair bet that people will tick most or all items on this list. Ask them if they are liberals, on the other hand, and many will turn contemptuously away.

That 20th-century connoisseur of doublespeak, George Orwell, would not have been surprised. Political language, it seems, has taken leave of political facts. Alan Wolfe, a professor of politics at Boston College, thinks it time to reunite them. His welcome and readable essay lays out what he thinks liberalism really amounts to and why it demands support.

Liberal politics, on his account, is rooted in a view of what matters in a human life. A gifted guide, he opens with a brisk Grand Tour of the liberal tradition. Glimpses of leading thinkers and the human values they argued for include Immanuel Kant (moral and intellectual autonomy), Benjamin Constant (protection from arbitrary power) and John Stuart Mill (promotion of human individuality).

The link with politics is that those three values all involve freedom. Whatever else it is, liberalism is about nourishing human liberty. Where liberals disagree is how that fits with a second powerful ideal, equality.

Right-wing liberals contrast “classical”, small-government liberalism and the modern, active-government kind. The one, so they claim, leaves people free while the other wrongly infringes freedom on behalf of equality. That story became popular in the 1970s, both as a history of liberalism and as a view of government’s limits.

Mr Wolfe, like other left-wing liberals, finds the contrast historically inept and conceptually confused. Making enemies of freedom and equality ignores, in his view, the democratic presumption that any one person’s liberty matters as much as the next person’s. It is deaf also to the fact that modern citizens’ freedoms are often limited by big social forces beyond their control. If all citizens are to be free in any effective sense,

they require help from countervailing forces. Government is one such force.

If, the argument goes on, you take concern for everyone's liberty seriously, you will treat the proper scale of government as a matter of circumstance, not principle. At times, government is overweening and ought to be cut back. At others, active government is required to steady markets, help the needy or serve the public good. Put abstractly, government may be called on to foster or restore equal liberty. Pragmatic, socially minded liberalism of that kind underpinned American and British government, from the New Deal until Ronald Reagan, from Clement Attlee to Margaret Thatcher. It seems, from necessity, to be with us again.

Mr Wolfe touches many topics. He defends liberals against the charge that they seek, illiberally, to keep religion and morals out of public life. In his most policy-minded section, he traces how liberal commitment to openness plays out with regard to free speech, immigration and transparent government. He notes the illiberal undertow of what he nicely calls "self-incapacitation books", or popular-science writing in behavioural economics and evolutionary psychology claiming to show what little part reason and responsibility play in how we behave. He rebuffs the frequent charge that liberals are wobblers or dreamers. The true liberal temper, he tells us, is realistic, ironic and disabused.

Through no fault of Mr Wolfe's, this fine defence of liberal values risks seeming to lag behind the news. He completed his book before Wall Street imploded, the American economy slumped and Barack Obama won the White House. Whether or not they buy the reasoning behind it, many readers will think Mr Wolfe's call for active government is now merely pushing at an open door.

Faster than anyone expected, the argument among liberals has shifted. It is no more about active versus limited government, but about what active government should be doing. On that Mr Wolfe could have said more. No one with an open mind, however, can come away from "The Future of Liberalism" treating "liberal" as a term of abuse. Before long, who knows, even Mr Obama may drop his reserve and embrace the word with pride.