

# THE HUFFINGTON POST

## Kenneth Minogue, An Imaginative Reactionary

By Dalibor Rohac – July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2013

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Kenneth Minogue, who passed away last week, aged 82, was an intellectual giant of the free market movement. At the same time, he was a man of great humility and a distinctly Australian sense of whimsy and wry self-deprecation. In spite of his advanced age he always seemed in fine shape, so his death on a flight from a special meeting of the Mont Pelerin Society in the Galapagos comes as a sad surprise.

In December 2011, with my former colleague Anne Applebaum, I had the pleasure of hosting him in London for an intimate discussion dinner about his last book, *The Servile Mind*. Although I cannot say I fully subscribed to his version conservatism, the evening was memorable - most notably for Mr Minogue's sharpness and ability to talk about highly abstract problems plaguing the Western civilisation in fully formed, thoughtful paragraphs. I was very surprised to learn that Mr Minogue was not happy with his own performance. In a thank-you note, he wrote to me apologetically that he wished he "had not been so confused over the first course" and that he wished he had "read a bit of script."

Holding oneself to high standards was the key element of his success as an academic. Mr Minogue came to England in the 1950s and taught first at the University of Exeter and then, since 1959, at the London School of Economics. Very quickly, his research interests have converged on the role played by modern liberalism in shaping political life in the West. In his first famous book, *The Liberal Mind*, published in 1963, Mr Minogue views modern liberalism - which is to be distinguished from its classical, individualistic variety - as an ideology with roots so deep and subtle that it leads to "an understanding of the world of whose bias we are hardly aware."

The attraction of modern liberalism is that "it provides a moral and political consensus which unites virtually all of us." According to Mr Minogue, it is a blend of compassion and of the deliberate effort to improve the society through political means. These intuitively desirable characteristics are dangerous, because they "[turn] all widespread problems into political problems, inviting a solution by state activity. It follows logically that people commit themselves to long-term planned objectives roughly as individuals commit themselves to new year resolutions."

In 1963, Mr Minogue still thought that this potentially dangerous side of modern liberalism could be kept in check by "such institutions as armed services, universities, churches and cultural academies" - a view that he later saw as clearly mistaken.

The titles of his first and last book are not accidental. Over time, Mr Minogue came to believe that the modern, progressive version of liberalism led to a corruption of our language and moral sensibilities. Instead of assuming individual responsibility for addressing moral and social problems, liberalism invites individuals to delegate that responsibility to the state. The result is the "politico-moral posturing" on causes ranging from global warming, to securing peace or gender equality.

Making the 'correct' noises and showing the 'correct' opinions has become, according to Mr Minogue, a substitute for moral action. The results are twofold: the growth of government and proliferation of bad policies, and an atrophy of genuine moral sensibilities. And that is destructive of free societies, which Mr Minogue saw as sustainable only with free, responsible, self-governing citizenry.

Mr Minogue's intellectual project was more humble than the grand theories advanced by John Rawls or Robert Nozick, who thought that political life needed to be based on an abstract set of principles. In contrast, for Mr Minogue, the life in a free society was based on a set of skills that needed to be cultivated and nourished. Wisdom embodied in cultural norms and traditions was central to freedom, even if the rationale for specific norms could not be articulated explicitly. And therein lied the danger of modern liberal tinkering with the West's institutions for the purpose of addressing existing social ills.

In political philosophy, Mr Minogue's position was a minority one. And even within the free-market movement, his cultural conservatism, with a strong emphasis placed on precedent and tradition, was not shared by everyone. Some would argue that to a great extent, modern liberalism - with its rhetoric of gender and racial equality and acceptance of gays and minorities - helped Western societies to become more open and tolerant. In Mr Minogue's gloomy outlook, there was little space for such considerations.

Whether one fully shares his worldview or not, one ought to appreciate Mr Minogue's practical contributions to the conservative and classical liberal thought, as well as his involvement in policy debates in Westminster and beyond. In the early 1990s, he led the Eurosceptic Bruges Group, a major prescient voice opposing the Maastricht Treaty, and he also served as President of the Mont Pelerin Society, organising the group's first meeting in an Arab country in April 2011 in Morocco.

In his characteristic tongue-in-cheek style, Mr Minogue described his political views as "reactionary" and his religious views as "imaginative" on his Facebook profile. This writer believes that the world would benefit greatly from more imaginative reactionaries of his intellectual calibre.