

Positive Liberty

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That Awful “L” Word

Jim Babka on Aug 24th 2009

Until the late 90s, the largest libertarian think-tank, the CATO Institute, tried to steer clear of the label “libertarian.” They tried a variety of tags to describe their political philosophy. One description they favored was “market liberal.” Obviously, that didn’t catch on.

Finally, they surrendered. In 1997 David Boaz, CATO’s Executive Vice President, published two books: [Libertarianism, A Primer](#) and [The Libertarian Reader](#).

I can relate. I also don’t like calling myself “libertarian.” And since we’re trying to reach out to a broad audience at [Downsize DC](#), I tend to bristle, whenever someone suggests that Downsize DC is libertarian. We’ve been known to work with a wide variety of diversely labeled folks.

Instead, we prefer to say, “We’re DC Downsizers,” meaning that we believe government’s power, expense, size, and reach should be reduced, and then reduced some more. That’s simpler and precise. Moreover, most Americans profess the belief that government is too big (obviously to varying degrees). We want all the agreement we can muster.

But why do I dislike being called “libertarian?”

For one thing, it comes with the baggage of a political party, which turns the idea of libertarian on its head — a collective institution, complete with five year plans, designed to bring about individualism. Partisanship has the twin virtues of...

- Mental rot — party members need not think for themselves, and can instead engage in instinctive group think, like rooting for their favorite sports team (the Special Pleading Express)
- Exclusivity based on hatred — the party apparatchik is bound to their herd because the other side is so stupid, so dangerous, and so evil (especially when they continue our herd’s old policies)

Thus, it is unfortunate that Libertarian became the name of a party.

For another, there are lots of people who call themselves “libertarian,” but they disagree about huge, significant things.

It’s a free country, and I guess you can call yourself what you want. Heck, call me what you want, but I think words should define something.

I want to cite examples, but without naming names. Maybe the guilty know who they are. But I’m not trying to attack

anyone personally here...

- Some are pro-preemptive bombing advocates, looking to decimate Islamic nations. They’re supporting the biggest government boondoggle and civil liberties-sucking program known to man — WAR.
- Some want to smoke dope and have access to porn at night, but by day they’re crusaders on behalf of Big Government environmental initiatives and state managed welfare programs.
- Some think libertarian is synonymous with conservative, or maybe that it means “ultra-conservative.” They speak of “ordered liberty” — a concept that is oxymoronic, at best. Sure, you must have the liberty to do what you ought. But who is to say what is required as “ought?” Conservative-libertarians have answers for that too. But none of those answers support respect for individual free will.
- Some think Congress does too much, but still want the government to fund “enlightened” programs (whatever the heck those are).
- Some are civil libertarians who like seven of the first eight amendments, or perhaps even all eight, to the Constitution. But they never express opposition to things like the current health care plans advanced by the current President.

Libertarianism was supposed to be based on a simple premise...

It is wrong for any human being to coerce other human beings to achieve their social or political goals.

“Coerce” is the key word. It means to force, to point a gun at someone who refuses to comply with our enlightened plans.

And even the Libertarian Party, for all its faults, made clear that it was the initiation of that force that was wrong. Self-defense was one of the ultimate rights of an individual.

Every exception I’ve cited above — war, central planning, ordered liberty, enlightened programs, and government funded/controlled health care — are examples of pointing a gun at someone, and forcing them to live under our social and political goals.

After all, who is going to pay for those wars, those bureaucracies, the police, the “good” programs, and government run health care?

This isn’t a purity test. It’s about my comfort in being labeled. After all, I’ve proved that I’m willing to work, to ally myself, on matters of principle, with virtually anyone who wants free people from a particular tyranny.

But if you support any of the aforementioned “exceptions,” you’re no more a libertarian than a person who eats meat every day but Friday is a vegetarian.

Calling oneself “libertarian” has become fashionable. But in this instance, I wish definition would trump fashion. Maybe then, I’d be more comfortable bearing that political tag.

Hardball delenda est.

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12 Responses to “That Awful “L” Word”

1. [#Muralion](#) 24 Aug 2009 at 10:28 pm

meaning that we believe government’s power, expense, size, and reach should be reduced, and then reduced some more. That’s simpler and precise.

Its too simple. In fact I believe you oversimplify and have lost precision in the process.

Mr Babka, with all respect, Will Wilkinson would call you a size queen (and I may have to agree with him). You seem to care more about big government than limited government (They are distinct).

For example, you extending the institution of marriage to gay people would make government larger. Yet, government is wrong in arbitrarily limiting that institution.

Government could downsize itself by not policing poor neighbourhoods and only rich suburban neighbourhoods and ignoring inner city neighbourhoods.

Eitherway, expanding government to protect everybody is better than having a smaller government. (And if it is libertarian to support policies like that, being libertarian is not a good thing, but libertarians do support or ought to support equal protection under the law etc. even if it increases the power and size of government)

Some want to smoke dope and have access to porn at night, but by day they're crusaders on behalf of Big Government environmental initiatives and state managed welfare programs.

There are libertarian reasons for government to legislate pro environment policies (e.g. a carbon tax) because the air and the environment is part of the commons which belongs to all of us. Polluters who damage the environment are not only dirtying their own land and property (They have a right to do so) but doing things that will damage my property: pollutants which cause acid rain and destroy my house and my crops. This, they have no right to do.

Regarding the welfare state, you are just begging the question if you argue that the state ought not to tax you in order to provide social services. You are already assuming that you have a right to all your free tax income. You are also assuming that you owe others nothing.

For example, if I see someone in a ditch, I really am a moral cretin if I leave him lying there. Basic human dignity actually requires from us some positive commitment to other's welfare. Hence, if in a state of nature, there are some people who's rights are not protected, we really should form a state so that their rights are protected. We are obligated to. A similar argument could be made about whether we ought to provide a basic minimum (e.g. friedman's -ve income tax)

Or alternatively I could argue that I am justified in redistributive taxation because I have to provide conditions such that the worst off in society either A) have reason to enter society or B) have sufficient resources to leave society. This means that I achieve something very close to voluntary government. (Which is a libertarian ideal)

To use your vegetarian metaphor, it seems that you are arguing that the only fruitarians ,people who only consume parts of a plant that do not involve killing the plant (anarcho capitalists), are legitimately vegetarian, or maybe only vegans (no eggs or milk) (minarchist equivalent) However, we commonly accept that Lacto Ovo vegetarians are still vegetarians (liberalarians, cosmotarians, social contractors). And vegetarian is still a meaningful word, because people who eat meat are not vegetarians. Similarly, Libertarian is still a useful term because there is an overall commitment to liberty among libertarians.

2. [# Tom Van Dyke on 24 Aug 2009 at 11:30 pm](#)

I've heard many people claim from both right and left [who know about such things], that they're "libertarians," small "l".

Shame about the Libertarian Party, but rock on, Jim. All is not lost.

[I meself think that politics should not "coerce" society---or if it does, mildly---as I do not consider society and government synonymous, and further allow for a gray area where neither society nor law holds sovereignty, because man's wisdom has its limits. I like things a bit undefined, like black markets, for instance. Occasionally, we must hunt down things like kiddie porn and forced prostitution, but on the whole, black markets are perhaps the best friends of liberty.]

3. [# Jim Babka on 25 Aug 2009 at 12:13 am](#)

re: Murali,

A "size queen?"

That's clever by half.

4. [# James Kon 25 Aug 2009 at 12:50 am](#)

I do think libertarianism is a bit broader than your definition Jim. I call myself a libertarian (if only a squishy sort) though I support some welfare and environmental programmes (though I'm not a crusader for them). Basically I'm a (Milton) Freidmanite, if the social democrats hadn't run off with liberal I'd call myself that instead.

5. [# James Hanleyon 25 Aug 2009 at 6:35 am](#)

Some of us want access to porn by day, too!

More seriously, I agree with Murali's point that the presence of externalities in pollution legitimate government coercion in response. It's quite similar to me walking up to someone and whack him with a baseball bat—even the staunchest libertarians generally agree that government coercion of me is justified *in response*. If the ore smelter just upwind from me does not control his emissions, so that they fall out on my house and yard, the situation is logically the same.

Of course that leaves vast disagreement for what form government action should take (including the claim that it ought to be more of common law issue than a regulatory one, but even that requires government coercion, to force someone to come into court, and to adhere to the judgment).

6. [# stevenon 25 Aug 2009 at 8:16 am](#)

If the state limited its activity to defense and retaliation against aggressors then I would have no problem with the state. But that's not how it works, and I don't think that's what anyone here advocates (except perhaps Jim). States always initiate force to compel membership and raise revenue, among other things. In the ore smelter example you give, James, I agree that you and others have the right to use force against those who are harming your property with their emissions, but you and others have no right to force others to assist you in doing so. Those others are not harming you, and, unless you and they have a voluntary agreement to help each other, they have no obligation to help you. Jim had it right when he said that it is wrong for any human being to coerce other human beings to achieve their social or political goals. That idea needs to be followed through to its logical conclusion.

7. [# James Hanleyon 25 Aug 2009 at 8:31 am](#)

Steven,

I understand your position, but I think the alternative you propose leads to a Hatfield/McCoy problem.

The underlying reality of humanity is that we're social animals living in groups. Groups require some degree of governance to function smoothly. I think the required degree is minimal, but non-zero.

8. [# Jason Kuznickion 25 Aug 2009 at 9:02 am](#)

Jim –

Good thoughts, but a couple of minor cleanup issues:

–The Cato Institute's name isn't in all caps. It isn't an acronym (unlike the RAND Corporation). Yes, the logo is in all caps. Sigh. If it were up to me, I'd change the logo, which has been the source of much confusion.

–Your final bullet point is garbled. I think I know what you mean to say, but it's hard to be sure.

Second, to Murali:

You write,

Mr Babka, with all respect, Will Wilkinson would call you a size queen (and I may have to agree with him). You seem to care more about big government than limited government (They are distinct).

For example, you extending the institution of marriage to gay people would make government larger. Yet, government is wrong in arbitrarily limitng that institution.

Government could downsize itself by not policing poor neighbourhoods and only rich suburban neighbourhoods and ignoring inner city neighbourhoods.

First, in some cases, the apparent size of government depends on where one sits. From my perspective, the government is vastly more involved in my life because I *don't* have a same-sex marriage. At every major life decision, and at quite a few minor ones, there is more paperwork and uncertainty.

If I had a valid same-sex marriage, my partner and I would find the government considerably less involved in our family life, which would be a reduction in the scope of government.

Second, I think that government downsizers of all types presume that the downsizing will be done equitably. I'd like to think that this is a safe assumption, but given how government *upsizing* is almost never done equitably, I have my doubts.

9. [# stevenon 25 Aug 2009 at 9:19 am](#)

James, governance, yes, monopoly governance, no. If someone wants to dissent from a group they should be allowed to, so long as they don't commit aggression. A group can use force to defend or retaliate against someone's aggression, but we shouldn't use force to include that someone in the group if they don't want to be included. Using force against someone who is not harming anyone else is aggression, which can never be justified.

10. [# James Hanleyon 25 Aug 2009 at 10:56 am](#)

Steven,

But what if that person is in fact polluting my property, and then says they don't want to be part of my governance group? There seem to be three options;

1. Just go shoot them (or some functionally equivalent retaliation, which may include my governance organization going to war against their governance organization).
2. Allow them to continue to pollute me without compensation or retribution.
3. Force them into my governance group.

I would argue that the last of these three is least coercive.

Of course, before anyone points it out, I've simplified my model a bit. One could, of course, move. But assume that (a) I was their first, and (b) I've invested everything into improving my property. I obviously can't receive equivalent value in return, so moving still harms me.

There is also, of course, the Coasean argument that in the absence of transaction costs, the polluter and I will solve the problem by the one valuing their action more highly buying out the other. But if we're in a system of non-governance, there is no enforcement of rights, so no incentive for the polluter to solve the problem through market mechanisms.

In brief, I think we are inevitably backed into a situation of monopoly governance at some level.

11. [# stevenon 25 Aug 2009 at 1:08 pm](#)

James,

Just because someone is not a member of your government group doesn't mean that you can't defend or retaliate against them for any harm they cause. They can claim all they want that they don't want to be a part of your government, but if they harm you by polluting your property you have a right to take action against them. You don't want to force them to be a part of your government, you just want them to compensate you for the harm they caused and to keep them from further harming you. So I believe option 1 is the correct one. Hopefully option 1 would involve peaceful negotiation instead of shooting and war, but there's no guarantee, just as there's no guarantee that nations won't go to war to try to resolve differences. Of course, the voluntary alliances we made with others would determine how well we would be able to deal with problems like this, so there would certainly be a strong incentive to be wise when we made these alliances. If separate nations can negotiate with other nations and form alliances to solve their

differences, then why couldn't small, voluntary governance groups or even individuals do the same thing? There's no reason they couldn't.

12. [# Jim Babka on 25 Aug 2009 at 1:34 pm](#)

Jason, I think I cleared up the confusion in the bullet point (thanks), but I left the spelling of CATO alone, and will, from this point forward, spell it unlike the logo.

Steven, You had me until that final entry. I am very close to your position, *personally*, but I think minimal government is cheaper and easier than going and shooting people (though, at times, that certainly has appeal too).

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