



# THE LEAGUE OF ORDINARY GENTLEMEN

## Libertarianism is dead

by E.D. Kain

“I don’t want to say that libertarianism is dead. But is it endangered? Sure. It deserves to be.” ~ [Jason Kuznicki](#)

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I think the hopes placed in the Obama administration by libertarians have been fairly well dashed at this point. On civil-liberties issues and on economic issues, the President has not gone nearly far enough to end the bad practices of the last administration, or to promote anything like market solutions to the many problems facing the country. Jason goes on to write:

If libertarians seem more conservative lately, it’s not only that we’ve been pushed away by the left. Attendees at this year’s CPAC ranked “[reducing size of federal government](#)” and “[reducing government spending](#)” as by far their highest policy priorities. They also [chose Ron Paul as their preferred presidential candidate](#). Those same attendees even booed speaker Ryan Sorba for condemning gay Republicans:



I’m not sure the left-libertarian alliance was ever really meant to be anything more than a fragile oppositional alliance to the big-spenders masquerading as conservatives during the Bush years, united by a common antipathy over the wars and the infringements upon civil liberties. I know Mark has hopes that a populist left-right alliance could rise from the ashes of the current establishment, but I see the fundamental divide between Tea Partiers and progressives as too wide a gap for anything but a similarly tenuous & oppositional alliance.

Reihan Salam, writing of better distinctions for the contemporary left and right in America, writes [that](#) ‘we could call left-of-

center Americans social democrats and right-of-center Americans liberals, or, to use an old Cato Institute term, "market liberals."

Really, though, the distinction is not between those who believe in markets and those who do not (while progressivism may lead to socialism, many on the left nevertheless understand and believe in markets up to a point) – but between those who have faith in central planning and top-down governance, and those who believe in decentralized solutions and distrust central and social planning (though, to be fair, there are right-wing social planners, too). And even then, within the 'market liberals' there are the libertarians and the conservatives (to rather broadly categorize), and I think the distinction there is that libertarians are more concerned with liberty-as-ends (and thus a little Utopian), whereas conservatives are more concerned with social stability, and are more cynical (and thus almost always liberty-as-means in their thinking). Both may believe in decentralized solutions and markets, but for somewhat different reasons.

I find I border between the two, since I believe that liberty and decentralization are essential components to a free and stable society (and a stable society without freedom is unsustainable), but believe that social order is the end-goal, that liberty & limited government are both means to that goal. Nor do I trust that a society without some roots in tradition can survive even its own prosperity, but that it will instead become self-obsessed, overly individualistic & detached, and essentially spoiled.

Limited government, markets, [competitive federalism](#), localism, etc. are all simply the best means to crafting and protecting a vibrant, sustainable, and stable society. Nothing is more inimical to that than a too-strong central government, no matter how seductive that top-down thinking can be (though I in no way advocate doing away with central government altogether, perhaps we should trade in leviathan for a smaller fish). Localism, insofar as localism is an expression of competitive federalism, works because centralization is doomed to failure, especially in a country the size and population of the United States. It works in smaller countries at least for the time being, but that is only because other elements in society have led to greater social cohesion than we could ever hope to achieve here in the United States.

And yet we move further and further toward the centralized state – not because of some wicked plot to destroy the constitution or bring about some socialist coup, but out of egalitarianism, out of an ever more ingrained faith in the capacity of the federal government to do good, to mandate fairness, to be a counterweight to power (when it in fact it is the very power we should be attempting to strike a balance against!)

Nor is that faith in the federal government's beneficence born simply of wishful thinking. The federal government can do good and has done good for a great many people. The question is whether it is the best institution to do lasting good, and whether such a centralization of power can as easily be turned to do great evil. It is certainly the only institution we have capable of waging perpetual war.

We have become so used to the idea that 'government' means 'federal government' and that the states and city governments are ineffectual at best. And that may be! But is that perhaps symptomatic of the larger problem? Have we neutered our state and local governments unwittingly in our quest for an ever more egalitarian society?

Alex Massie, musing on David Cameron's 'post-bureaucratic society' [writes](#):

This, it should be said, runs contrary to Cameron's professed view that localism is a way of finding successful programmes that can then be spun out across the country. The whole point of localism is that, to a large extent, those programmes don't exist. What works in one area may inspire something in another but much of the time the extent to which any programme can be transferred is likely to remain limited. [...]

In the end, however, the localist idea is a new version of an old one. It's Tocqueville and his local associations. That's the spirit that built countries once before and there's no reason why it can't again.

Indeed. But I digress. I meant to ask a question: Is Jason correct – is liberal-tarianism dead? Are conservatives really doing enough to woo back the libertarian vote? And if they do, is that relationship any more sustainable? The [polling at CPAC](#) reveals a new brand of conservatism focused far more on fiscal and economic concerns than on social issues. Then again, on issues of national security, libertarians and the conservative establishment still stand on opposite ends of the room.



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1 **Michael Drew** { 02.23.10 at 8:35 am }

Most liberals fully and enthusiastically embrace markets as the best way to distribute goods in a society. They simply differ from libertarians in the extent to which they believe unregulated markets' extreme outcomes should be redressed by reasonable levels of regulation.

[\[Reply\]](#)



*North*

February 23rd, 2010 at 9:46 am

Amen Michael. Seriously, the actual people who want to abolish Markets deserted the Democrats for the Green and other fringe left parties long long ago. I think it's very unfair to characterize the Democratic Party, which has moved a long way to the right on the economic front in the last two decades, in that way.

Otherwise, good post. I wish the liberalitarian alliance could be more lively than it is. Cold blooded neo-liberal that I am I would love to have more libertarians on the left.

[\[Reply\]](#)



*Dave*

February 23rd, 2010 at 11:16 am

Mark has always been more optimistic about a liberalitarian alliance than I am and I guess from Micheal's statement I can understand it since I bang my head against a wall every time someone implies I believe in unregulated markets. After what has transpired, I tend to get very hostile to that position. Pure unadulterated bullshit.

[\[Reply\]](#)



*Michael Drew*

February 23rd, 2010 at 1:32 pm

Are you a libertarian? I'm not sure if you are saying you get hostile to a laissez-faire position, or if you get hostile to the