



What Use Is a Libertarian?

By Clive Crook

The current issue of Reason features a symposium on the question, "[Where do libertarians belong?](#)" Not in partnership with today's Republican party, argues Brink Lindsey. The alliance of conservatives and libertarians has worked badly, he says, despite the tea party and its apparent fondness for libertarian themes.

Could the withered fusionist alliance of libertarians and conservatives channel today's popular disgust with statist excess into revitalized momentum for limited-government reform?

In a word, no. Without a doubt, libertarians should be happy that the Democrats' power grabs have met with such vociferous opposition. Anything that can stop this dash toward dirigisme, or at least slow it down, is a good thing. Seldom has there been a better time to stand athwart history and yell "Stop!" So we should rejoice that at least some conservatives haven't forgotten their signature move.

That, however, is about all the contemporary right is good for. It is capable of checking at least some of the left's excesses, and thank goodness for that. But a clear-eyed look at conservatism as a whole reveals a political movement with no realistic potential for advancing individual freedom. The contemporary right is so deeply under the sway of its most illiberal impulses that they now define what it means to be a conservative.

Jonah Goldberg and Matt Kibbe push back in the symposium, and rather effectively. (I thought they also got the better of Lindsey in this [live exchange](#).) The problem with Lindsey's position, for me at least, is not one of substance. Policy by policy, I agree with him much more often than I agree with either progressives or conservatives. My libertarian instincts are probably mushier than his, but we are in the same intellectual space. The issue is one of tactics and strategy -- and here I find his thinking confused.

He repudiates conservatism so passionately that you suppose he would prefer libertarians to fuse with liberals. And of course one recalls that in 2006 he famously proposed a "liberal-libertarian entente" in an article entitled "[Liberalarians](#)". (He is currently working on a book with Will Wilkinson called "The Free-Market Progressive: How We Can Use Capitalist Acts Between Consenting Adults to Create Justice, Peace, and Prosperity".) Thus he appears to propose a new alliance. In the symposium he nonetheless writes:

Does [the failure of the libertarian-conservative alliance] mean I think that libertarians should ally with the left instead? No, that's equally unappealing. I do believe that libertarian ideas are better expressed in the *language* of liberalism rather than that of conservatism. But it's clear enough that for now and the foreseeable future, the left is no more viable a home for libertarians than is the right.

Equally unappealing? How am I to square that view with the liberalaltarian project? The answer must have something to do with "expressing libertarian ideas in the language of liberalism", but I don't know what that means. (Your ideas are wrong but we like how you express them. Hmm.) I suppose what Lindsey means is simply, "Libertarian methods are often the best way to achieve righteous progressive goals" -- a position I agree with, but which has little or no chance of finding support among today's progressives.

Elsewhere in the symposium, Lindsey does get it exactly right, I think:

The blunt truth is that people with libertarian sympathies are politically homeless. The best thing we can do is face up to that fact and act accordingly.

Yes, which is why liberalaltarianism is a dead end. Libertarians disagree with progressives about markets and with conservatives about "values", and that is really that. To the extent that they (we) serve any purpose at all, it is to challenge the two dominant strains of thinking, hoping to nudge each in the right direction. For now at least, I cannot see what purpose is served by worrying about which of these unappeasable opponents would make the better partner.

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