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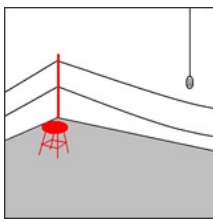
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'What Use Is a Libertarian?'

By Veronique de Rugy August 26, 2010 12:16 P.M.

The Atlantic' Clive Cook [asked that question yesterday](#) after reading a symposium titled "[Where do libertarians belong?](#)" in the current issue of *Reason*. As you may know, Brink Lindsey has been arguing for a while that, contrary to long-held belief, libertarians do not have a natural alliance with the Republican party. His conclusion is that libertarians should form a new alliance, this time with liberals; hence "[libertarianism](#)."

I agree with Brink that the libertarian ideal of small government has been poorly served by the Republican party. To be clear, the expectation of a libertarian alliance with Republicans only concerns economic issues, as both sides know that there is little chance of agreement on social issues. However, that's hardly reason to think that we libertarians would be better served on economic issues by the Democrats (see the last 20 months). Moreover, while it is true in theory that libertarians should [bond](#) with liberals on social issues, in practice they don't. Democrats have served libertarians poorly all around.

Lindsey seems to get it when he says:

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.

I agree, and I am fine with that. I guess the ones who aren't fine with it and who are desperately searching for political alliances think that you must vote for one party or the other. I don't. Of course, not being an American citizen yet, I am not allow to vote, but I doubt that the right to vote will change my [position](#).

So what use is a libertarian like me, then? None, Crook seems to argue:

Yes, which is why libertarianism 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.

I agree with Crook that libertarians represent a challenge to both parties, but isn't that an important role?

Over at Money Illusion, Scott Sumner [has a list of some of the areas](#) where libertarians have had an influence on liberals:

Let's review what liberals used to believe, before libertarians knocked some sense into them:

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1. In the US, they believed the prices of goods and services should be set by the government. Ditto for wages. This took the form of the NIRA in the 1930s. It took the form of multiple industry regulatory agencies like the ICC and CAB. By the late 1960s and early 1970s they favored "incomes policies" which were essentially across the board wage and price controls. Today they generally favor letting [the market](#) set wages and prices. Very liberal Massachusetts recently abolished all rent controls.
2. In the US, they believed the government should control entry to new industries. They have abandoned that belief in many industries, and based on recent posts by people like [Matt Yglesias](#), are becoming increasingly disillusioned with remaining occupational restrictions.
3. They favored 90% tax rates on the rich. Today they favor rates closer to 50% on the rich.
4. In most countries liberals thought government should own large corporations. Today most liberals around the world think large enterprises should be privatized. Over the next few decades there will be trillions of dollars in new privatizations, and very few nationalizations.

I think these are great [examples](#) of the usefulness of libertarians. Think about it: How many of us ever have a chance to bring about policy changes? I ask myself every day, how much difference do I make professionally? For nine years, I have been a budget analyst fighting against the increase in government spending, and under my watch, the federal budget has grown by almost \$2 trillion. But I am happy to see myself as someone who tries desperately to keep lawmakers honest.

By the way, [Crook's piece](#) does a good job of exposing Lindsey's inconsistencies. Could it be that Lindsey isn't as comfortable with his own position as he claims?

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