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Our road to serfdom [1]

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Reading the news this week, I have been reminded of FA Hayek?s classic essay ?Principles or expediency? [3]?.

The impossible task of liberals, said Hayek, was to argue for a general principle of liberty in circumstances where ?pragmatists? wanted to give a little liberty up for some other direct and visible benefits. The benefits of liberty are unseen and indirect. They are sometimes hard to justify on a ?pragmatic? case-by-case basis, but on aggregate are critical to a flourishing society. In Hayek?s words:

> *"it is not in our power to build a desirable society by simply putting together the particular elements that by themselves appear desirable. ? If the separate steps are not guided by a body of coherent principles, the outcome is likely to be a suppression of individual freedom.?*

So it is with the government?s plans to store every person's emails, search histories and social networking activities, and read them at will without a warrant.

Josh Lachovich has already highlighted [4] the government?s hypocrisy in proposing this measure. The coalition parties? manifestos and the programme for government all explicitly ruled out ?database state? measures and, indeed, promised to roll back the surveillance state. Of course, these were all lies.

The depressing thing is how predictable all this is. ?Pragmatic? erosions of our civil rights to date ? CCTV cameras everywhere, centralized government databases of personal information, attacks on habeas corpus, covert surveillance operations by local councils and sundry encroachments onto people?s online privacy ? have led naturally to this grotesque new plan.

Every new piece of authoritarianism has been justified as ?counter-terrorism?. As Hayek would have recognised, the many freedoms we have given up ?pragmatically?, ignoring the value of upholding the principle of liberty, have led to our current position.

Given the amount of our private lives that we conduct online, the government?s proposals are really just a modern updating of 1984?s telescreens, which videotaped the inside of every person?s home. If there is there any meaningful difference, I can?t see it.

The government?s new proposals are crass, authoritarian and stupid. All decent people oppose them, but they may go through nonetheless. When the principle of liberty is conceded in favour of false ?pragmatism?, the great benefits of living in a free society go as well.

That is what Hayek meant by his often-misunderstood title, ?The Road to Serfdom?. Each step along the way, giving up a little freedom, might seem expedient and sensible. By the time you?re in a country where the government indefinitely stores and can read your emails at will, it?s too late.

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