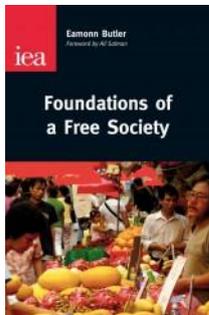


[The foundations of a free society](#) [1]

Written by [Dr. Eamonn Butler](#) [2] | Friday 22 November 2013



I have just published [Foundations of a Free Society](#) [3] with our colleagues at the Institute of Economic Affairs. It was intended to describe the working principles of a free society to those who, unfortunately, don't live in one. Trouble is, that as I started sketching out all the essential foundations of a free society ? freedom, property, trade, justice, toleration, moral rules, incentives, rights, and limited government ? it became obvious to me that none of us really lives in a free society, and that very few of us understand it.

We all accept that democracy is a good thing, for example. And so, we are told, we should have more of it ? that more and more of our lives, right down to what we eat, drink and say, should be prescribed by law. And how we run the rest of our lives and businesses should be regulated too. We simply forget the joy and necessity of human diversity and the power of competition to regulate business.

Trouble is, as readers of another of my IEA monographs, [Public Choice ? A Primer](#) [4] know full well, political decisions are in reality interest-group decisions. They call the shots in elections. And politicians and officials have their own self-interest too. So off we go, ambling down the Road To Serfdom, imagining it is all being done for our own good, when it is done for theirs. And most of us do not know enough about the underpinnings of the free society to dig in our heels before it is too late.

The free society is not a random collection of selfish individuals. It is something complex and organic, and based on deep values ? not values that challenge other moral systems but values that make cooperation and social harmony possible.

It is no easy task to build a free society out of an unfree one. The institutions of today's free (or more-free) societies have grown up over hundreds or thousands of years and reflect local history and circumstances. There is no blueprint we can give people to build their own. But we can at least give them a rough outline of the sorts of foundations they need to build freedom ? or, in the case of those of us in the supposedly free West, to rebuild it.

[blog comments powered by Disqus](#) [6]

Source URL: <http://www.adamsmith.org/blog/liberty-justice/the-foundations-of-a-free-society>

Links:

[1] <http://www.adamsmith.org/blog/liberty-justice/the-foundations-of-a-free-society>

[2] <http://www.adamsmith.org/authors/dr-eamonn-butler-0>

[3] <http://www.iea.org.uk/publications/research/foundations-of-a-free-society>

[4] <http://www.iea.org.uk/publications/research/public-choice-a-primer>

[5] http://disqus.com/?ref_noscript

[6] <http://disqus.com>