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Libertarian motion wins at Cambridge Union [1]

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I was invited to the Cambridge Union (pictured) this week to speak for the motion, "The best state is that which governs least." I pointed out that the quotation, often attributed to Thomas Paine or more plausibly to Thomas Jefferson, was in fact from Henry David Thoreau in 1849. He also said, "Law never made men a whit more just; and by means of their respect for it, even the well-disposed are daily made the agents of injustice."

I also cited Thomas Hobbes saying, "The liberty of the subject lies in the silence of the law," and rested the case against an intrusive state on two arguments. The first was the moral case that when government sets its priorities, it denies people the chance to live by their own values and, indeed, to be fully human by exercising choice. Thoreau himself had said there was nothing about a majority vote that linked it to morality and justice. The alternative to state government is not no government, I said, but self government.

The second argument was that of efficiency. States are not very good at doing things like running schools or collecting garbage. Indeed, they are not very good at government. They waste huge resources on layers of bureaucracy and management, and usually make a poorer job than citizens could achieve by voluntary association. I cited the Royal National Lifeboat Institution which has rescued people at sea for 180 years, running 230 lifeboat stations and saving an average of 22 lives every day. It does this without government funding or control. I suggested that if government ran it, it would cost 200 times as much, and that health and safety offices would probably stop lifeboatmen putting to sea because it was too dangerous.

Finally I suggested we should ask of the state what Diogenes asked of Alexander the Great, to stand out of the sunlight. That would leave people free to get on with their lives. Gratifyingly, the motion for a minimal state was carried by a small majority.

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