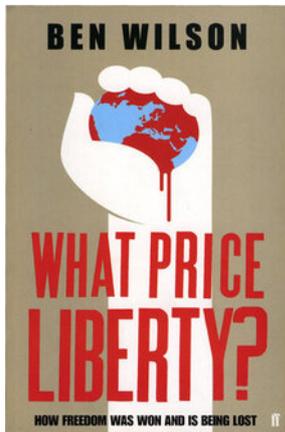


[What Price Liberty?](#) [1]

Written by [Charlotte Bowyer](#) [2] | Friday 28 May 2010



I've just finished reading 'What Price Liberty? How freedom was won and is being lost' by historian Ben Wilson. And I must say, it was a fascinating read. Using Berlin's negative definition of liberty, Wilson chronologically charts the growth, decline and battle for individual liberty over the last four hundred years of British history.

While reporting and examining political events across the centuries, Wilson seeks to identify the factors that have extended freedom. It is not often large-scale demonstrations, benevolent governments or even constitutional checks and balances that nurture liberty, Wilson argues, but "the direct action of bloody-minded individuals". Liberty has been won, bit by bit, in "moments of storm and passion" by minority groups, opportunism, and, quite often, unintentionally. And when liberty has been protected without legal restraints on government, it has been because the concept and language of liberty flourished in public debate. Using examples from across ages and the political spectrum Wilson shows that when individual liberty is considered sacrosanct by all classes the political desire to meddle is beaten down: though not always without a fight.

However, Wilson gloomily claims "the liberal phase in our history seems to be coming to an end". From the emergency legislation of the World Wars that seized liberty in the name of national security and victory, subsequent declines in individual freedom are all too painfully noted. Again, Wilson's analysis is interesting: that over recent decades we have become more 'risk-averse', with the fear of social disorder, crime and terrorism encouraging people to incrementally hand over their liberties in return for increased security and peace of mind. The information age has seen state regulation and data hoarding increase, while the lines between public and private, protection and intrusion have become increasingly blurred. New Labour's desire for a strong and efficient state was at ends with the principles of 'cumbersome' liberty, and so its importance was downplayed at every opportunity. Another blow to liberty has been struck, Wilson argues, by Britain's uneasy response to multiculturalism. Our fear of offending minorities has lead us to attack everyone's right to free speech, and created legislation that makes all of us less free and more fearful of those who are 'different'.

How do we counteract this? The answer is to re-invigorate the language of individual liberty, and encourage it to be spoken by politicians and the public. This liberty is the foundation of social harmony, progress and economic growth. Britain's relative freedom has been admired and mocked, but always

recognized; it is up to groups such as the ASI to demonstrate how essential this freedom is and insist that liberty is at the forefront of policy decisions.

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