Bleeding heart libertarianism and British politics [1]

Written by **Sam Bowman** [2] | Tuesday 17 September 2013

I have a chapter in a new publication by Liberal Reform [3], the classical liberal movement within the Lib Dems, in which I make the case that non-libertarians and libertarians may find a surprising amount of common ground if they put their differences of opinion about wealth and income redistribution aside. (Unfortunately, you have to sign up to Liberal Reform's mailing list to read that piece. You use my email address to login instead: sam at adamsmith dot org)

Basically, the chapter is an attempt to sketch out a British political economy of Bleeding Heart Libertarianism, the movement that has sprung up around American philosophers like Matt Zwolinski. The main areas I identify are immigration reform, drugs legalization and 'modern mercantilism' (a broad term for corporate and middle-class welfare).

I do think there's a lot of common ground between libertarians and people on the left, but for a serious dialogue to work I propose that libertarians shift their focus from opposition to wealth and income redistribution to a single-minded focus on the regulatory apparatus of the state:

> I suggest that libertarians concerned with the plight of the poor should abandon their opposition to wealth redistribution in practice and focus instead on the regulatory state, where we have a much greater degree of certainty about the harm caused. For libertarians who wonder if they are BHLs, the question might be: If libertarian institutions existed and serious, significant poverty persisted, would state action be justified in acting to relieve at least some of that suffering, if we had a pretty good reason for thinking that that action would work?
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> I think that it would, and if you have a serious commitment to welfare so should you. The only problem should be an empirical one, which I cannot say is strong enough to reject all wealth redistribution. While I am extremely confident about the benefits of liberalising planning to allow new homes to be constructed in the UK, I feel less confident about saying that all redistribution is harmful.
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> So I propose a compromise: a ?libertarian welfarism?. This might see us reform tax credits and the

> welfare system into a combination of universal basic income and a ?negative income tax? that acts as a top-up to people?s wages, adjusted to give a little more to people in low-income jobs and the unemployed. The details of this approach to income redistribution are not important for now: what matters is the idea of a simple, cash-based redistributive mechanism. I find myself very comfortable with this kind of redistribution; other libertarians will be less so. But perhaps they could accept it as the cost they have to pay to persuade others about the other, much more important, things they have to say.

I expect many people to find this kind of thinking quite outrageous, but to me the really strong arguments for libertarianism are based on our beliefs about ignorance and incentives, not justice, so they should only preclude redistribution of wealth as a matter of pragmatism. There's no intrinsic reason you can't combine those ideas with "left-wing" beliefs about what a good world looks like any less than they can be combined with "right-wing" beliefs about the kind of world we watnt. I don't know if libertarians will ever be able to have the same influence on the left that we've had on the right, but it's worth a try.

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