

The case for single-issue activism [1]

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Classical liberals, libertarians or indeed anyone arguing for a smaller state (I'm going to use 'Liberals' as shorthand) have a serious problem. We don't seem to be very successful at converting the corpus of intellectual work and powerful arguments against interventionism into concrete political success. Whilst the Archbishop of Canterbury, Polly Toynbee or Michael Sandel, to name a few, seem to think we are living in an era of unbridled free markets, any sensible observer can see that this is not the case; state capitalism or corporatism is the status quo. In reality, the trend of the last twenty years has been a move away from free markets with growing taxation and more regulation. What can be done to reverse this trend or at least to revive the momentum of support for limited government?

While there are some elements of the Conservatives and perhaps Liberal Democrats with (some) Liberal ideals and one or two Labour politicians have sensible ideas on particular issues there are no elements of mainstream political life we can call home. Fortunately, one might say the same for out-and-out socialists but I would argue that, given the size and reach of government and the state of public discourse, they are rather more at home in contemporary politics.

Of course, think tanks like the ASI do much to promote Liberal ideas and convert them into workable proposals which even manage to gain political traction and become policy and, just occasionally, get implemented. For all the good work of these organisations, I think most of their members would be forced to admit that they are fighting an uphill battle. If nothing else, public choice theory dictates that the odds are stacked against them. As I suggested, I find the prevailing political discourse extremely dispiriting, featuring as it does constant calls for state intervention and constant opposition to liberalising reforms. There is certainly no popular, broad-based movement for Liberals in the public sphere. There seems precious little Liberalism in the press and only a handful of Liberal academics. We have no Tea Party equivalent here in the UK (I have my reservations about the US Tea Party but at least it's something) but we do have an Occupy movement.

We need to start growing popular support and become a serious voice to be considered in national political and public life. We need some nodal points around which to coalesce and some banners to follow. Liberals, myself included, tend to shy away from such activities and many of us are quite conservative in the Burkean sense and others are too busy trying to earn a crust, or what's left to us after the state has taken its share. Others are simply too bookish or lacking in a can-do outlook. I think it's time to change this and to get a broader range of people introduced to Liberal issues. Broadening the base of support is, necessarily, going to mean taking a more limited, gradualist approach as well as, not instead of, pointing out the flaws of central banking and moral problems of interventionism. The Taxpayer's Alliance is the

right sort of direction; my approach would differ in that it promotes a definitely single-issue approach. This is not really a job for think tanks or academics ? their task is to come up with the ideas and provide the supporting arguments. At the moment, the Liberal movement is all brain and no body.

The only period, as I see it, when the supporters of freedom have made really sizeable inroads against the state was in the early nineteenth century where single-issue campaigns against the Corn Laws, slavery, emancipation of Catholics and so on brought substantive achievements. Many of those involved were, as Lord Acton observed, not true supporters of freedom. Similarly, amongst Thatcherism?s greatest achievements must surely be the great utility privatisations or curbing of excessive union powers even though many Thatcherites were hardly typical supporters of Liberal freedoms. It is this limited, achievable and comprehensible type of reform we first need to find and then unite behind. Otherwise we?re simply wasting our efforts on too many fronts and on theoretical niceties which have no relevance and resonance to daily life. Surely it is better to achieve several modest victories for liberty than preserve ideological purity whilst government continues to expand?

I would like to suggest therefore, that we adopt a slightly different approach and learn from our opponents and other groups who have proved successful in achieving some of their goals. I think that Liberals should consider emulating activist and single issue groups in promoting and popularising their agendas. Consider the modern environmental movement for a start. This started as a rather obscure minority sport. However, single issue campaigns such as that against CFCs saw a marked growth in environmental awareness. Like them or not, Greens and green issues are now a serious force in mainstream politics.

I?m not proposing that we man the barricades or start camping in churchyards, although at least that would be something. Nor do I think that these kinds of activities ought to be at the exclusion of intellectual and policy work already extant. I do think, however, that serious, organised, single issue campaigns with professional and volunteer activists should also constitute an important part of the Liberal ?movement?. These organisations should have websites, professional PR, use social networking, host seminars and events and all the various other mechanisms that campaigners use to get their causes heard.

I?d like to propose a few areas which I think are ripe for single issue-type campaigns. However, to be successful these would need to be carefully and seriously thought out.

i) Perhaps the most obvious candidate for a campaign would be **school vouchers**. Whilst these may be a sub-optimal choice in terms of theory, most would agree that they represent a vast improvement over the status quo and would at least be the first means to break the state monopoly over education provision. Combined with the Free School movement, such a campaign would provide a clear, single-issue campaign which could potentially bring in a wide range of supporters and perhaps expose them to wide libertarian issues. At the moment, a search for ?school vouchers? brings up Tesco?s sports voucher scheme! Privatisation of universities would be another clear target.

ii) In the social welfare sphere, perhaps the most obvious campaign would be the privatisation of state pensions along Chilean lines. Whilst there is already a [basis for a campaign](#) ^[3] by the ICPR there is surely a case for a localised, British campaign with a clearly defined set of goals. A campaign for the **complete privatisation of social housing** [along these sorts of lines](#) ^[4] would surely present the kind of limited, single issue where progress could be made.

iii) The monolithic dominance of the NHS and its position as the sacred cow of British politics leaves few avenues for discrete campaigns in the field of healthcare. Efforts like the Dutch to convert the NHS to an insurance-based, or better yet an **individual healthcare account system** a

la Singapore are unlikely to succeed although of course are worthy of effort. It is amazing how little successful opposition there has been to the serious attacks on freedom for smoking, drinking, consumption of fatty foods

iv) In transportation, **privatisation of the motorways** would seem to present a more popular choice than, say, congestion charging. This would be especially true if paired with some **reduction of road tax or fuel duty**^[5]. It would be easily implemented and has the example of the M6 Toll to support it to some extent.

v) In monetary terms, I would love to see a **campaign for a return to the gold standard**. Of course, this would be enormously far-reaching and complex but it could build upon the excellent work of the [Cobden Centre](#)^[6]. That said, more focussed campaigns on behalf of savers against, say, QE and low interest rates might actually prove more valuable initially.

vi) The [2020 Tax Commission?s](#)^[7] report was excellent but I feel its aims were rather too broad and aren?t likely to have great follow-through. However, a campaign devoted to the abolition of a particular tax such as the **abolition of IHT, SDLT or NICS** would present a perfect opportunity. The taxation and benefits system is so complex and intertwined that it seems to defy comprehension, let alone reform. This would seem to make it hard to sell as a single issue but surely tax simplification in some form is an obvious area

vii) Campaigns against specific aspects of legislation and regulation might be worth exploring. The Human Rights Act is a particular bogeyman, so surely certain pieces of legislation are ripe for attack. **Abolition of the national minimum wage** is urgently needed, this could perhaps be best sold by regionalisation combined with an attack on national pay bargaining in the public sector. Similarly, the **abolition of various QUANGOS** and their functions could be represented.

viii) One can think of other discrete areas of public life which are ripe for privatisation. Royal Mail is the most obvious and is perhaps already in the headlights, but a vocal public effort could hardly hurt and would keep media attention focussed. **Drug decriminalisation** is another area where serious campaigns could be developed and might even get the Guardian onside. The censorship of broadcasting freedom and the BBC must be gradually undermined as well. Overseas aid needs some lobbying voices against the loud noises from the aid lobby. There are many, many more.

Of course, there are some existing groups and individuals out there, but they are few and often lacking in organisation and funding. The big question, of course, is: who is going to start these campaigns going? Unfortunately, I can?t answer that, but perhaps there might be someone or some people reading with the inclination, knowledge, skill and most of all funds to try? If I had any funds to do so, I?d be the first to put my money where my mouth is ? but you certainly have a volunteer. So, any takers?

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