
Selling the Free Market to Nonbelievers

BY RALPH HOOD

During most of my life I have failed miserably to turn so-called liberals into free-market advocates. Perhaps it was my attitude. “If you weren’t so stupid you could understand” is a poor way to sell an idea, I guess. It surely didn’t work for me.

Lately, to my amazement, I have had some success. Two Presbyterian ministers have actually come around to agree that Adam Smith was right (one of them now maintains that Smith’s “invisible hand” is provided by God, and that suits me fine), and one NASA rocket engineer has come around on some areas, if not all.

There is a reason for this heady success. I have changed my tactics. I decided to quit arguing with “liberals” and instead began to explain the market from their side of the fence.

For example, when the subject of National Public Radio (NPR) comes up, I no longer call it a socialist plot (that never worked, anyway). Instead, I readily admit that I, personally, love public radio. It is, in fact, my favorite radio network. I listen to it all of the time, but it does make me feel guilty.

The astonishment on the other person’s face is priceless. “Guilty? Why would you feel guilty?”

“Well,” sez I, “NPR is, after all, a subsidy for upscale, educated people, and I just feel so sorry for the poor folks working to pay for my choice of radio programs. I just can’t figure out why some fellow flipping hamburgers at minimum wage in Seattle should pay for the music I want to hear in Alabama. It doesn’t seem fair, somehow. After all, I’m not forced to pay for his rap music.”

Ah, fellow believers, it would put joy in your heart to see the confused look on the person’s countenance.

He is shaken to the core and is prone to walk away shaking his head and muttering.

Likewise with tariffs and quotas. I have never figured out why “liberals” seem to be in favor of trade restrictions, but many are. Several, in fact, are in my Sunday-school class. They were blatantly uninterested when I explained that trade quotas raise the prices that all of us pay for sugar and other products. They figured that was just Ralph, spouting off about money again.

Now, I take a different tack. “Tariffs and quotas on imports just seem so unfair to the poor people of third-world countries—the very people that our church supports with foreign missions.” That confused look comes back but with a touch of wariness this time. They have grown suspicious.

“Uh, unfair in what way?”

“Well, gosh, here we are giving money to them as a church and as a nation to help them out of their desperate plight, yet we deny them their most fundamental right, the one thing most likely to ease their life: the right to sell us their products. And we do that just so a few Americans can get rich selling us their products at higher than world market prices.

“Liberals” are not accustomed to defending their position when you point out how said position costs the poorest of the poor. They really do believe that the free market is for robber barons and other rich folks. Interestingly, I have never, ever, had a “liberal” come up with satisfactory answers on these subjects.

Try it. You’ll like it.



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