



Principles Must Come Before Politics

BY RICHARD M. EBELING

We live in a time of quick fixes and patent medicines. The “physicians” offering to spoon-feed the elixirs for what ails us are the politicians running for office. Rarely do people step back and ask themselves whether there is really any ailment at all, or whether the politicians’ snake oil can cure anything. And the political charlatans certainly have no incentive to tell us that their rose-colored sugar water is all a con to get them elected.

It has become a platitude that too many people are unable to focus on anything that requires more than five minutes’ thought. Whatever the various reasons for this—and explaining it has itself become an academic growth industry over the years—the fact is that many people do not seem to look much beyond the short run when it comes to thinking about social, political, and economic problems.

This is not new. In the 1950s the German free-market economist Wilhelm Röpke observed that “people do not seem to stop and think and to ask themselves quietly what exactly they are doing. ‘We must do something, no matter what’ seems to be the unspoken motto of our age. . . . More and more people no longer know what it means to put first things first and to think in terms of the principles involved. Consequently, only a very few still have a real philosophy which separates the essential from the accidental and which puts everything in its place. . . . We are running after current events, instead of stopping to reach the solid ground of principles and to ask ourselves seriously what might have been the reasons why so much goodwill, energy, intelligence, time, and money have been wasted or not given the results we had a right to expect.”

Even when principles are supposedly talked about, the discussions are often shallow and without much substance. “Democracy” has become the watchword of the day in political discourse about events at home and abroad. But whether it be the television pundits or high

political officeholders, talk about democracy means nothing more than voting rights and an expression of the “people’s will.” As long as people can have their say when they pull the lever in the voting booth, the world will somehow miraculously have peace and prosperity.

In an era of “feel good” politics no one’s mind is to be taxed by political philosophy or economics because someone’s self-esteem might be harmed if he found the intellectual exercise too uncomfortable. So little is said about the true meaning of freedom and its actual relationship to democratic practices.

“Freedom” thus becomes anything that relieves a person from responsibility for the consequences of his own actions—with politicians shifting the cost of those consequences to other people’s shoulders. And a person’s “rights” refer to requiring others to provide the financial means to satisfy whatever ends will make him happy—even if the government has to coerce those others to part with what they have honestly earned.

At the same time, there are many people who talk about dealing with the dangers of bigger and bigger government and the budgetary burdens it imposes on all of us. But, again, rather than focusing on fundamentals, theirs is often only an attempt to find short-term gimmicks to deal with the problems.

This, too, is the result of focusing on politics. It’s often pointed out that the political preferences of voters are distributed in the shape of a bell curve. At the ends are the political “extremists,” collectivists and individualists respectively. In between, under the dome, are the vast majority of voters who are somewhere “in the middle.”

If a politician is to be elected, it is explained, he must appeal to a significant number in that middle, since there are just not enough votes at either end of the curve to win an election. Thus he must weave together a patchwork of inconsistent and often contradictory positions

Richard Ebeling (rebeling@fee.org) is the president of FEE.

that will reflect the diverse political views of his potential constituents.

This also limits what market-oriented think tanks in either Washington or in the various state capitals can offer as policy options in the debates about the role of government. Even while seeming to be nudging the debate more in a free-market, smaller government direction, the boundaries in which they can frame their proposals are constricted by what the politicians consider “politically possible.” Beyond those boundaries the policy advocate becomes a “kook,” a pie-in-the-sky “nut,” an extremist who does not realize that “nobody” is going to take *those* views seriously. The policy advocate risks losing political legitimacy and a hearing in the halls of power—which is why his organization is located in that center of political decision-making.

This often means that policy proposals are “watered down” to be politically acceptable. Even the defense of a policy is often couched in terms designed to avoid the impression that its advocates support anything as radical as, well, laissez faire and the end to the interventionist welfare state.

Any detailed and fundamental discussion of government policy is therefore implicitly ruled out of court. Once attention is focused on influencing what government is doing right now, the debate is defined by what is politically practicable today.

Moving the Curve

The real political task, however, is not to try to attract votes or nudge policy in the context of the existing bell curve of voter preferences. Rather, it is to move the curve in the direction of individual freedom, limited constitutional government, and a truly free market. In other words, the task is to shift the curve’s dome over to where its individualist tail end is today, so that someday the middle mass of voters will more or less hold views generally consistent with classical-liberal ideas.

But this requires looking beyond what is politically

expedient today. Indeed, it requires ignoring what seem to be the boundaries of the politically possible and instead thinking in terms of the politically desirable. If policies really consistent with individual freedom are ever to be implemented, we must first explain to our fellow citizens what such a society of freedom would look like, how it would work, and why it is desirable. They must slowly but surely come to see the vision of liberty.

Maybe part of the reason so many people seem unable or unwilling to think beyond five minutes is that they are so infrequently challenged to do so. Maybe our fellow citizens find it hard to break out of the current mindset of the existing interventionist welfare state because they are too rarely offered a clear and consistent case for the classical-liberal ideal and why it would be good for them and others they care about. Maybe people are often trapped in the policies of the short run precisely because they almost never are presented with a political and economic philosophy of freedom for the long run.

Politics will always only reflect the existing distribution of people’s political views. Political campaigns, therefore, will never be the primary method for transforming society from less free to more free. This will only happen outside of the narrow political process—through a change in the climate of ideas.

Though most people don’t know it, they *are* guided by an implicit set of political and economic principles when they think about and decide on what they want government to do. These principles are the ideological residues of nineteenth- and twentieth-century collectivism. They need to be replaced with a new set of political and economic principles, those of classical liberalism. When a sufficient number of our fellow citizens accept classical liberalism, politics will follow principle and the interventionist welfare state will be opposed and finally abolished. This is why a radical change in principles must come before any successful change in politics.

