The Rest of the World

The arguments of the previous chapter are relevant to the libertarian movement in general, but much of what I wrote was in the context of the U.S. Libertarian Party. What about the rest of the world?

How to Jumpstart a Third Party

Some years back I read a post comparing the UK Independence Party, which describes itself as libertarian, with the US Libertarian Party. The author pointed out that UKIP was at the time supported by between seven and fourteen percent of the electorate while the LP had received only about one percent of the votes in the then most recent presidential election. Libertarianism is a more familiar idea in the U.S. than in the U.K. and the U.S. is, on the whole, the more libertarian of the two societies, so it seemed surprising that a U.K. libertarian party would do so much better than a U.S. one.

His explanation was that UKIP drew its support almost entirely from a single issue — Euroskepticism. A large fraction, possibly a majority, of the electorate was against U.K. membership in the European Union. Both the major parties were for it. In a world where most people are not very interested in political philosophy, he thought that what UKIP wa doing was the right way for a minor party to become major. Find an issue compatible with your views that a sizable fraction of the population supports but the major parties oppose. Adopt that issue, identify with it, use it to recruit support. Retain the rest of your position in the background; people who join you for the single issue and have no strong beliefs of their own on the rest of the package are likely to accept without paying very much attention to it. He offered as a historical example of that strategy the Republican party, whose initial issue was opposition to slavery. Arguably Trump's triumph in the competition for the 2016 nomination, based on positions on immigration and trade that neither party was supporting, provides a more recent example of the approach, this time within a party.

Events since the post was written demonstrate one problem with the tactic. When Brexit passed in 2016, the single issue on which UKIP had attracted most of its support disappeared. UKIP tried to maintain its position by being more Brexit than the Tories, coming out for a more complete break with the EU than was being negotiated, but by 2017, the first post-Brexit national election, its support was down to 1.8%, in 2019 to 0.1%. If the Libertarian Party wants to adopt that tactic, it would be prudent to pick an issue unlikely to either go away or be adopted by a major party any time soon.

What issue should the LP, or the libertarian movement more generally, try to claim? The author of the post suggested "economic justice." Considered as a slogan, the major parties already support it. Once you give substance to the slogan, you end up either with something at least one of the major parties supports or with something that few voters support.

What might be good alternatives? A possibility inspired by the initial success of the Tea Party is reducing the deficit and/or scaling back federal spending. Both parties sometimes say things along those lines but neither acts that way; proposals for "expenditure reduction" usually turn out to be only reductions in the size of planned increases. Not only is such talk by the major parties almost always bogus, it is perceived as such by a sizable fraction of the population, so a party running on those issues might collect a significant number of votes.

A second possibility is opposition to the War on Drugs. Neither party is willing to adopt that one, although its mildest version, marijuana legalization, is now supported by a majority of voters and has passed in a number of states.

The Other UK Libertarian Party

UKIP described itself as libertarian and had some libertarian members, but its policies combined economic libertarianism with social conservatism; one of its main issues was opposition to immigration. Of the eight issues featured on its current web site, only one, support for free speech, is libertarian, and that one not very controversial. Reading through their online literature I found points that would attract libertarians but nothing that would both attract libertarians and repel social conservatives.

There is another party in the U.K. with some claim to being libertarian — the Liberal Democrats. Reading statements by leaders of that party, it looks as though some of them were moderate libertarians in modern U.S. terminology — liberals in the old sense of the term still surviving in Europe,.

> "One: we will repeal all of the intrusive and unnecessary laws that inhibit your freedom. "
>
> …
>
> I'm a liberal.
>
> My starting point is always optimism about people.
>
> The view that most people, most of the time, will make the right decisions for themselves and their families.
>
> That you know better than I do about how to run your life, your community, the services you use.
>
> (From a [2010 speech](#) by Nick Clegg, deputy prime minister of the U.K. and leader of the Liberal Democrats)

The party was formed as a coalition between what remained of the Liberal party, which prior to the first World War had been one of the two major parties, and the Social Democratic party, made up mostly of ex-members of Labour unhappy with its hard left policies. In 2010 the Liberal Democrats, having secured 23% of the vote and 57 seats, went into coalition with the Conservatives. In 2015 the Conservatives won an absolute majority of seats and so were able to form a government by themselves; the Liberal Democrats came in fourth[1] that year. In the most recent national election, the Liberal Democrats were down to 11.6% of the votes and 11 seats.

As Wikipedia puts it, "There is a degree of ideological diversity among members of the Liberal Democrats" — from liberals to socialists. The socialists are arguably more libertarian than the Labour Party, in favor of redistribution but skeptical of increasing state power. The Liberals are considerably less libertarian than the Libertarian Party but more libertarian than either of the two major parties.

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[1] Fourth to UKIP, measured by votes, to the Scottish National Party, measured by seats.

To quote a small part of the very long preamble to the party's Constitution:

> We recognise that the independence of individuals is safeguarded by their personal ownership of property, but that the market alone does not distribute wealth or income fairly. We support the widest possible distribution of wealth and promote the rights of all citizens to social provision and cultural activity.[2]

Most of the rest of it amounts to "we are for home and motherhood and against the man-eating shark," suitably expanded for a twenty-first century audience.

Like UKIP, the Liberal Democrats were an attempt at introducing a third party into a two party system with the hope of eventually replacing one of the major parties as Labour replaced the Liberals over the first half of the 20th Century. Neither was very libertarian and at the moment it does not seem likely that either will succeed. But the odds, at least for the Liberal Democrats, look much better than for the LP.

Libertarianism Abroad

Over the course of a European speaking trip in 2013 I gave thirteen public talks in sixteen days. Most were set up by libertarian organizations, broadly defined — liberal in the European sense of the word. The four largest had audiences of about two hundred people each.

There were two related features of my experience that I found encouraging, beyond the size of the audiences. One was that in almost every case most of the audience, so far as I could tell, had come to hear me, not to hear my father's son. The other was that, with only a few exceptions, the audience contained a lot of people familiar with libertarian ideas; the libertarian movement is alive and well in Europe. A total audience of over a thousand is a very small fraction of a population of several hundred million; I am not counting on a European shift to anarcho-capitalism, or even minarchism, in the immediate future. But at least the ideas are out there.

And, to shift to a topic already mentioned, one that gets a good deal of attention in the libertarian blogosphere, my wife's observation of the larger audiences was that women made up about twenty percent. The one exception was my final talk, given to an audience not of libertarians but of college students interested in economics. That audience was almost half women. The only place I have spoken that did better than that was the country of Georgia, where libertarian women significantly outnumbered libertarian men, leading me to suggest to my hosts that they should either be exporting libertarian women or importing libertarian men.

Continuing along those lines, in interacting with the International Students for Liberty, I observed a higher proportion of women than usual in libertarian organizations. When I asked one of the women running the organization how they managed it, her reply was by getting the men dress decently. I doubt that it is that easy.

Rereading, for this chapter, the blog post that I wrote after my 2013 trip, it occurred to me that it would be worth getting more detailed information on libertarianism outside the U.S., so I looked up World Libertarian Parties on Wikipedia. There are quite a lot of them, all more libertarian than either UKIP or the Liberal Democrats. Some are soft core libertarian, aiming to push their societies a little farther in a libertarian direction, but a fair number are as hard core as the LP. Four of those

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[2] https://www.libdems.org.uk/constitution. Most of the document is a longer version of "we are in favor of home and motherhood and against the man-eating shark," suitably expanded for a

have produced electoral results similar to those of the LP in the U.S., sometimes getting more than one percent in a national election, with two, the Liberal Democratic Party in Australia and Svobodni in Czechia, roughly equalling the LP's high score of between three and four percent. The soft core parties have done a little better, with seven getting more than one percent, three of which, the Liberal Alliance in Denmark, ACT in New Zealand and Liberty (Korwin) in Poland have highs about twice the LP's.

It looks, judged by that measure, as though libertarianism is about as alive in Europe as in the U.S..

The Mont Pelerin Society, Milton Friedman, and the World

The Mont Pelerin Society was created after the Second World War a time when supporters of free markets were rare, especially in the academic world. Part of its purpose was to give people with classical liberal views the opportunity to spend at least a few days a year with others who did not regard their beliefs as obvious nonsense, fit only for the wastebasket of history. Some decades later a number of people associated with the Society, including my father, suggested that perhaps it was time to dissolve it, since views that had been regarded as obviously obsolete in the late forties had become, if not always accepted, at least widely known and widely viewed as serious contenders in the marketplace of ideas. It was no longer necessary to go to some far corner of the world to find colleagues who shared a generally pro-market viewpoint; with luck there were at least one or two down the corridor.

The argument that ultimately persuaded him and others that the Mont Pelerin Society ought to be continued was that the situation was very different elsewhere. Especially in the Third World countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America, to a significant degree even in Europe, believers in free markets still found themselves in the situation that classical liberals had faced when the Society was founded, isolated in a sea of left wing orthodoxy. For them at least, the Society could continue to serve its original purpose.

I was reminded of this reading the comments on my memorial post for my father. What was striking was not the number but the geographical diversity. In addition to the U.S., condolences came from people who identified themselves as from:

Angola	Germany	Romania
Argentina	Hong Kong	Serbia
Australia	Iceland	Scotland
Bangladesh	Ireland	Singapore
Belgium	Italy	Spain
Brazil	Japan	Sweden
Canada	Maldives	Switzerland
Costa Rica	Mexico	Taiwan
Croatia	Netherlands	Turkey
Denmark	Phillipines	UK
France	Poland	Uruguay
Guatamala	Portugal	Venezuela