

Windsor Liberty Seminar 2008

Today I attended the Windsor Liberty Seminar for the first time. It was great! Here is a pretty long "summary".

Topic #1: Registration was at 9:30, and by around 10:00 we were already into a discussion of "The Effects and Mysteries of Economic Freedom" by Fred McMahon. Fred is the Director of Trade and Globalization studies at the Fraser Institute. He opened with a perplexing question which could be summarized as this: What motivates anti-market forces to still rail against free markets when they see the great good produced? He shared how no one can provide one example of a modern stable democracy based on a non-market economy. He showed how we should aim to change the opinions out there by provide a wide audience with good information about the situation. He then spoke of the Economic Freedom of The World project and the Economic Freedom of the World Index. The index is based on the following factors: Size of government and taxation, Private Property & Rule of Law, Trade Regulations & Tarrifs, Regulation of Business, Labor, and Capital Markets

Fred then continued to question why economic liberty is important. His answer was three fold: It is fundamental to political and civil freedoms. It is needful for growth. It is needful to broader human development.

He also shared about their work in the Arabic world and also many helpful charts and figures (though I do regret that he went rather quickly through much of this). He showed the relation between economic freedom and GDP per capita. He also showed how the economic freedom is tied to improvements in democracy, political rights, the human development index, life expectancy, infant mortality, and water sources.

On the question of injustice in free markets, Fred provided some eye-opening evidence. There is no marked difference in equalities present in all societies (whether they be economically free or not). So the logic that free markets breed inequality is bunk. Its just that in economically free countries, people's own choices determine the inequalities, whereas in economically non-free countries, government compulsion determines inequalities. In addition to that, the poorest 10% in the economically free countries are far better off that the poorest 10% elsewhere! To conclude his talk, Fred opened the podium to audience discussion on his opening question.

Topic #2: Then, at around 11:00, Jan Narveson (professor emeritus of Philosophy at University of Waterloo) had an excellent talk on "Revitalizing Liberalism". To say that Jan's academic credentials are impressive is an understatement. He's studied at Oxford and the University of Chicago, but has his PhD from Harvard, and he earned it in 1961! He discussed how "liberalism" has many meanings and is a very schiziphrenic word nowadays. He noted the sharp divide between what the term meant in the 18th/19th centuries and what it means now. He then discussed how both Conservatism and Liberalism are theories concerned with "good government", which would be government for the benefit of the governed, to promote their interests. This leads to the question of "Good for whom?" What is the "common good"? It is popular nowadays with relativism to deny that this "good" could exist. Jan then showed how Conservatism was rule for the peoples good in the sense that it was to find out what was supposedly good and force them to do it. This is characteristic of Greek thought, particularly Aristotle. But the hallmark of liberalism, classical liberalism and not modern deviations, is a denial of old Conservatism and the statement that the ruled should decide what is good for them. This does not mean, of course, that the people are actually RIGHT in what they think is good for them, but rather that they should just be able to decide for themselves to their advantage or harm.

Jan then discussed Paternalism and explained how there is an Old Paternalism and a New. The basic idea of Old Paternalism is that A takes care of B, as if B were a child. And the government tells the people what's good for them and makes them do it. The New Paternalism is what modern-day liberalism promotes. It determines that the good ends are set by the people, but the means/promotion of these god ends are carried out by the government as a paternal authority figure. And he shared his conclusion that the New Paternalism is no better than the Old. He also brought up some implications this might have in relation to religion, though that was more of a side point.

Jan then asked the question of: "Why liberalism?" He discussed the alternatives: Conservatism/Old Paternalism compel you to do what you don't like to do. On the other hand, neo-liberals/New Paternalists pretend to be "liberal", but aren't really. And the sum of it all is that the premises of both these group don't imply the conclusion. He then proceeded to a very key part of his talk. When we discuss "What is good for you?", there are two aspects to consider:

- Passive Liberties: Pleasure, utility, health, well-being
- Active Liberties: Freedom, power, skills, direction

Modern liberalism emphasizes Passive Liberties at the expense of Active Liberties. They project what will make you happy but don't consider that your being free to decide for yourself may be what makes you happy. We won't be happy with Passive Liberties if we can't obtain them via Active Liberties. And what is good for us lies both in our Passive and Active Liberties.

Jan then showed how Libertarianism is really the outcome of true classical liberalism is. He spoke of Hobbes and other thinkers and then defined libertarianism, politically speaking, as the view that the purpose of the state, if any, is to keep each other off of each others back. It sees that picking Passive Liberties over Active Liberties doesn't work, but also that picking Active Rights over Passive Liberties doesn't work either.

Another helpful distinction that Jan made was the between Negative Rights and Positive Rights. Negative Rights were defined as those which prevent you from doing what you or others judge to be best (ie. that you NOT do certain things). Positive Rights were defined as those which you or others are required to do to help others. He shared, as an example, the Right to Life. He showed how the Negative Right in the Right to Life is that you have a right not to be killed, and the Positive Right is the right to be saved if you are in danger. He showed how there is much confusion between these two type of rights, and how we can reasonably expect Negative Rights, but not positive Rights.

At this point in Jan's talk, my pen stop working, so I had to stop writing notes until I could get another, which was just in time for the next talk. The rest was equally good, and Jan did a fine job making some heavy-duty thoughts describable. I really connected with his thinking and I found this to be the most appealing talk at the seminar.

Topic #3: At around 1:30, Bruce Walker, Communications Manager for Mackinac Centre for Public Policy spoke on "Renting Your Land From The Government: The Property Rights Battle". Bruce showed how though we have some semblance of ownership, the government still ultimately gets to say what we can or can't do with our property. And it can take it from us. This, admittedly, was not my favorite topic. The subject matter was helpful and very practical (moreso than the other two topics), but I still found that the time Bruce took to get to the core of the matter distracting. And perhaps having just had lunch had something to do with it! :) But I must credit Bruce with a presentation that was still very helpful and showed a good deal of what the Mackinac Centre for Public Policy does.

Bruce showed how other rights disappear when you abolish the free market. This is what Karl Marx missed. He thought he was freeing people, but he was really just enslaving them by eliminating the pillars of their liberty. And, no matter how wrong Marx was, he did properly recognize the central importance of property rights.

Bruce then showed a couple of helpful videos. One was about a Michigan family business that was attempting to use land for a horse operation and composting, and how the government has been harassing them with all sorts of unbelievable things, while not even hiding its intent to take over the land for their own purposes (in other words, intimidating them with regulations in order to further their agenda to use the land for future projects). The other was about Hart Enterprises, a medical equipment company whose future parking lot was determined to be wetland and could not be utilized. The only problem is that it became a wetland after (and because of) its official demarcation as industrial property. Both videos were quite interesting and showed interviews with the involved parties and some good insights on the problems faced.

Bruce's talk was pretty good, even though I share a couple negative thoughts to start off my review of it. Property rights is a vital issue and his presentation was excellent in stimulating much needed discussion on this issue. And, without a question, Bruce's talk was an important part of this seminar.

In conclusion: The talks, along with the discussion groups that followed after them, were great. The discussions in small groups were great and allowed more detailed, less formal discussions. I found all participants to be intelligent individuals who contributed much to the discussion. I highly recommend you check out this seminar next year. It was certainly worth going and is a great place for liberty-minded people to meet a share ideas. There was a good mix of people. A free meal was provided. I didn't win the book draw, but I did get a signed copy of Jan Narveson's "The Libertarian Idea". Sweet!

-- Mark J. Nenadov / March 15, 2008