

Does Liberalism Have a Heart?

Jim Peron, Institute for Free Enterprise

Delivered at the European Freedom Summit, June 2, 2007 in Berlin

What is it that is at the heart of liberalism and does liberalism have a heart?

Those are important questions.

The heart of liberalism is that of liberty as the name so clearly implies. Liberals love liberty. We even get sentimental about it. We are passionate about it. We believe in it.

But our liberalism does not simply makes liberty an ideological concept. It has real implications for real people. And it directly effects liberalism's heart.

A reading of world history compels the liberal to believe that people are better off when free. They are better feed when they are allowed to own property, work for their own self-interest, and keep the products of their labour.

They are better educated when they are allowed to debate, discuss, and argue with one another. When ideas are free and when the human mind jousts with other minds to grapple with, and hopefully understand, the truth about our selves and our world.

Our opponents, those who love to control and regulate, denounce us as heartless. They argue that we don't care about the poor because we oppose their plans.

For them there is no limit to how much money should be taken to fund what they see as the needs of the poor. They call this being charitable. But their charity is not at their expense.

It is so very easy to be charitable when you can impose the costs on others. Not only can you spend, and spend, and spend but you don't have to worry about the effects of the policies.

When one plan fails you replace it with another. And when that fails too you replace it with another. And if it fails spectacularly then you expand it.

They are generous with the hard earned funds of working people not with their own money and thus they are as careful in their spending as drunken teenager with his dad's credit card. When you aren't spending your own money you have no real incentive to spend wisely.

Your charity can last as long as you can reach into the pockets of others. There is no program you can't propose. There is no limit to the agencies you can establish, to the number of bureaucrats you can hire, to the number of laws you can pass or regulations you propose.

Each new measure, which increases the power you have, is justified in the name of charity.

It is one thing to feed the hungry or to help the poor. It is another thing to create massive, bloated, uncaring bureaucracies to do your charity for you.

It may well be that some politicians are really compassionate. I'd just have an easier time believing it if they were compassionate with their own money and not someone else's. So ingrained is this false concept of compassion that the one time NZ prime minister Helen Clark engaged in an act of private charity she was still tempted to use the work of someone else as her own.

When asked to donate a painting of her own for a charity auction she signed her name to someone else's work. People were shocked. But why? Isn't the entire left-wing policy of compassion built on exactly this type of fraud? Aren't they merely being charitable with the effort and work of others? It's foolish to condemn the painting incident when the entire welfare concept of government is built on this type of fraudulent charity.

If those on the Left wish to persuade me of their genuine compassion then let me see them using their resources for charity. It's not that most of them can't afford it. So why is it that they are so intent on being charitable with the money of working people?

The Left argues that the man who believes in individual caring is not as compassionate as the man who creates a professional class of do-gooders with other people's money.

But the man who cares for his neighbor is satisfied when his neighbor benefits. Together they can address problems and find solutions -- solutions that are specifically tailored for the needs of that individual. The caring neighbour finds great satisfaction when his charity is no longer needed.

But the professional agents of "caring" want a class of full-time career opportunists. They offer those in need a one-solution-fits-all ideology that takes no account for individual needs. And they dread the day that their services are no longer needed. Everyday they work in a system that means their unemployment if they every solved the problem they were hired to solve. Unlike the caring neighbour their interests are to find new needs and greater needs.

When we look around the world, from nation to nation, we see how the professional welfare bureaucrats have acted and we discover a pattern.

Any problem they are hired to solve is never solved. They do not work themselves out of a job. Instead their budgets increase yearly. They demand more fellow workers. They expand their areas of concern. Each year they discover more and more people in need of their professional care.

They have endless seminars and conferences. Frequently they meet with other professional from other nations — often near lovely warm beaches. They will lament how hard it is for them to solve the problems of others at the salaries they receive so they lobby continually for higher pay for themselves.

And after decades of caring concern from these professionals what are the results? Do we find that the objects of their charity are manifestly better off? And by better off I don't mean are they perpetual beneficiaries. I do NOT mean have they created second, third or fourth generations of welfare addicts.

When these professionals first proposed their programs they promised us that they would wipe out poverty. But they haven't even come close. They promised that the unemployed and unemployable would soon find productive work. They haven't. They promised that their policies would improve the lot of children but they haven't. After decades and decades of promises they have failed to deliver on even one of those promises .

Instead of solutions what have they given us?

First the working people work longer and longer just to support the caring bureaucracy. We have higher taxes. We have countless rules and regulations controlling the most minute aspects of our lives? We have thousands and thousands of professional carers who live at our expense. We have bloated bureaucracies, endless paperwork, a multitude of snoopers and endless rancor and conflict.

What we don't have is less poor, less crime, less child abuse, less problems.

And yet they call their solutions "caring. What audacity? What cheek?

And if you dare point out to them that they have failed, and failed miserably, they will accuse you of being heartless. They will attack your lack of compassion. They may even accuse you of being a liberal.

But are we liberals so heartless when we demand economic policies that create wealth and expand job opportunities?

Is it a lack of compassion that watches working families struggling to make ends meet and suggests that reducing their taxes will improve their lives?

Are we heartless because we don't find everlasting welfare the solution to people's problems?

Our "compassionate" opponents condemn us because as liberals we want to expand choice.

We look at the educational system and think that parents and students would be better off if they had more choice in educational opportunities.

The "carers" want to restrict choice. The teachers unions have demanded that educational choice be restricted. They don't want to have to compete for jobs.

They don't want poor teachers to lose their positions nor do they want to reward excellent educators. They are worried about their jobs not about the students. Of course they will pay lip service and talk about how competition in teaching will reduce standards.

Yet in every other aspect of human existence competition has expanded choice. It has improved standards. It has lowered costs and improved results. Competition gives us better cars, better CD players, and better light bulbs.

But the "compassionate elite" argue that choice is bad for students. It isn't. But it is bad for the elite..

It is bad for the lackluster.

It is bad for the unconcerned.

But it is not bad for students. It expands their opportunities.

But there is something else behind this type of so-called caring. There is an assumption that individual citizens are too incompetent, too stupid, too foolish to be allowed to make choices. They need the Nanny State to make choices for them.

One night on CNN I saw Larry King interview an American politician, Ann Richards the former governor of Texas, who is an advocate of the Nanny State. King asked her about proposals which would allow Americans to invest some of the money they paid into social security into private investment accounts. All the studies showed that this option would substantially increase retirement benefits.

Also remember that Social Security was one of those one-solution-fits-all programs that the Left loves. But in practice it meant that the typical Black worker, while paying in equally, was unlikely to collect the same returns as white workers. And just when Black life spans were increasing, and thus equalizing pay outs, the government went and upped the age requirements for collecting.

In addition Social Security transferred wealth in ways the Left wouldn't like to acknowledge. A gay man would pay in for a lifetime but his spouse would receive nothing upon his death. So the American Left was, and still is, howling in unified support for a plan that openly discriminates against African-Americans and gay people.

A plan set up by altruistic, caring Lefties refused to take individual needs into account. After all the Left denies individuals and only fights for "group rights." But in the world of uncaring capitalism the market responds very differently. Annuities will pay out at any age you set. And who your beneficiaries are is of absolutely no concern to the profit-seeking capitalist. And though these results are obvious the professional do-gooders prefer the system that penalizes individuals over the one where everyone comes out ahead.

Ann Richards was quite open in her contempt for the average person. And she was unpersuaded by the facts. She was also completely honest as to why. She said, and I paraphrase her as best I can remember: “Well, Larry. When it comes to investing our money I trust you. And I trust that I’d make the right decision. But that average guy out there driving a pick up, well I’m not so sure he’ll make the right decision.”

What was Richards saying?

She’s saying that the advocates of Big Brotherism simply have no trust in the people. They are elitists who look down on the objects of their charity. They have no compassion for the needs of people just an exaggerated ego that cries out for the right to dictate to others.

It is those silly liberals, those neo-liberals who are “heartless” and uncompassionate who are stupid enough to actually trust the people.

The Richards of the world I might add, have no confidence in people. They don’t trust them. Every few years they campaign on promises to “help” people. But once in power they have no confidence in the people who elected them.

The people may be smart enough to have voted them into office but that’s where it stops.

They are not competent to decide what school their children should attend.

They are not intelligent enough to make decisions for their own retirement.

They are not bright enough to decide what terms should be included in their employment contracts.

They are too foolish to know what books to read and thus need censors.

They are not caring enough to help the needy so caring is compulsory.

They aren’t even entitled to spend the money that they earn. Government bureaucrats should spend it for them.

Over and over, in the name of caring, the Left strips people of their wealth and their right to choose. They demand the right to regulate others. They propose laws that expand their powers, that increase their numbers, that secures them more perks. And they do it in the name of the people --- the very same people who are too incompetent, too stupid, too foolish, too uncaring to make choices for themselves.

What type of genuine caring would come with such contempt?

And then those heartless liberals come along and want to increase choice. How dare they? How can they be so uncaring?

But uncaring for whom?

Is it uncaring for the unemployed to expand job opportunities? Is it contempt for the poor that proposes expanding educational choice so that their children have more options in life?

What is so compassionate about several generations of the same family never finding their way off of the public dole?

We liberals don't have all the solutions. In fact we don't think anyone has all the solutions. And that's why we think freedom is so important.

That's why we want to expand the choices given to the poor. We have a confidence in people that our opponents can not match.

Instead of bureaucratic elitism which allows a few anointed ones the power to control the lives of the many we propose letting people make choices themselves.

We think free people are prosperous people. Our opponents believe in a society where they get to decide for everyone.

They will write your employment contract and you will take it regardless of what you think about it.

They will pick the teachers for your children. They will dictate the course of study. They will run the schools. They will even determine your divorce settlement if you need one.

They will speak and you will listen.

They will order and you will obey.

They will spend and you will pay the bills.

But choice is forbidden.

They will plan your retirement for you. They will confiscate your money to pay for it. And how much you receive and under what circumstances will be entirely up to them. Your own needs and choices are irrelevant.

Perhaps when they talk of charity what they mean is contempt. Contempt for the choices of free people is really what they advocate.

They don't propose policies that expand your choices only policies that expand their powers.

They don't try to find ways to allow the hard working to expand their financial resources. Quite the opposite -- they demand more and more of what you produce.

For every dollar they take from you they have one more dollar's worth of authority, one more dollar's worth of patronage and power. Exactly who's interests are they looking out for?

We liberals aren't elitists. We don't pretend to know what's best for you. We aren't unhappy to extend a hand of assistance or a word of encouragement. We just don't want to control your life. We don't want to have the right to spend the bulk of your income. We don't think we know what is best for your children. We don't pretend to know what job you should take, what salary you should demand, or when and where you should work.

We simply have faith that you are the best governor of your life. And if we want your life to improve, and we do, the way we do it is not by taking away that right from you and transferring it to ourselves --- but by expanding the choices you have. Each new choice is a new opportunity for you to discover what is best for your life and for the lives of the people you love.

We don't think that's heartless. Not at all. That is true compassion and true caring.

There are many people who need genuine help and genuine care. But does a state monopoly on caring provide it? Is compassion best served by expanding the number of bureaucrats and by giving them more discretionary funding and powers? We don't think so.

A growing economy solves more social problems than all the bureaucrats put together.

Greater choice in education will help more children than all the seminars and conferences combined.

Trusting people, not bureaucrats, is the way to discover new directions for improving lives.

The heart of liberalism is one that is driven by the belief that people should be free to make choices. It argues that when people are so free that they will improve their lives, that they will discover what is best for themselves. Liberalism doesn't believe in elites in Wellington dictating to the many. It believes in the millions of individuals who understand their own lives better than any bureaucrat and it gives them the power to make choices.

Liberalism is a philosophy of trust in the people themselves. And that is not heartless.