

## The Libertarian Alternative

By Chris Berg  
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Reviewed by Bill Stacey



Writing a book about a systematic school of political thought is a difficult task in Australia. Debate is dominated by interests wearing a veil of utilitarianism. Historian Sir Keith Hancock in his 1930 classic *Australia* observed that ‘Australian democracy has come to look upon the state as a vast public utility, whose duty is to provide the greatest happiness for the greatest number’ (p. 72). Hancock also noted the paradox that the origins of this utilitarian Australian democracy are individualistic.

Chris Berg’s subtle book seeks to reconcile the tensions Hancock illuminated between, on the one hand, Australians’ knee-jerk recourse to this ‘vast public utility’ and the reality that the administrative state is increasingly poor at delivering on a utilitarian calculus and, on the other hand, the deep vein of individualism that has kept Australia one of the more free and prosperous societies in the modern world.

Berg is a Senior Fellow at the Institute of Public Affairs in Melbourne, and is one of Australia’s best known voices for free markets and individual liberty. In *The Libertarian Alternative*, he acknowledges that libertarianism can easily be portrayed as an alien ideology imported from the United States and inspired by traditions and experience that have been shaped by a bill of rights, a civil war and a religious experience that we do not share. Berg’s work is at its best in demonstrating that the roots of Australian classical liberal thinking are much deeper than is commonly appreciated by political histories dominated by the emergence of the existing Labor and Liberal parties. He shows the importance of Richard Cobden and free trade in an Australia that

first prospered in the years after the repeal in the United Kingdom of the Corn Laws in 1846 that marked the beginning of the golden age of free trade globally.

Berg also identifies William Hearn and Bruce Smith\* as two early classical liberals whose vigorous arguments for a liberal Australia and minimal state—focused on ‘securing equal freedom to all citizens’—were swept away by the movement towards protectionism and racially-motivated immigration restrictions. Interests of manufacturers and the emerging labour movement aligned in the period around Federation to take Australia down a path that undermined social mobility and dynamism.

Nostalgia for a past that might have been is not the purpose of this work, however, nor is it merely a ‘primer’ re-hashing familiar ideas. Rather it is an attempt to show that here and now, this coherent set of ideas has an authentic Australian resonance and heritage that offers an alternative suite of solutions to the pressing challenges of today, with which conventional politics is struggling.

A pithy, readable work such as this cannot comment on all policy areas and it sensibly selects contemporary debates over issues that can best illustrate the principles at stake. Free trade, open immigration, the environment, free speech and the challenges for justice of anti-terrorism laws are the policy topics selected for deeper analysis. Omissions include the more difficult questions of monetary policy and the constitutional framework to protect liberty.

Berg is not afraid to stoke controversy across the political spectrum. His views on ‘unlocking the borders’ (chapter 6) are classically liberal, arguing ‘migration is overwhelmingly positive for home and destination countries alike’ (p. 87). The principle is that if goods should be free to traverse borders, should not people have the same freedom to trade their labour and live where they choose. From this he skewers the ludicrous complexity of the visa regime, the over-reaction to asylum seekers, the flaws in the UN convention on refugees with its false distinctions between ‘genuine’ and ‘economic’ refugees, and refutes the case that the welfare state necessarily

\* CIS reprinted Bruce Smith’s 1887 treatise *Liberty and Liberalism: A Protest Against the Growing Tendency Toward Undue Interference by the State with Individual Liberty, Private Enterprise and the Rights of Property* as a CIS Classic in 2005, available at <https://www.cis.org.au/publications/cis-classics/liberty-and-liberalism>

renders migration too costly. If that policy mix seems too one-sided, then for balance Berg shows that ‘multiculturalism is in many ways anti-individualistic’ (p. 91) because it focuses on ethnic groups. He rejects the idea in favour of pluralism because it allows for individual differences within a common political and legal framework.

The selection of policy areas to focus on shows something about who this book is written for. The arguments for a libertarian view are standard, written with a refreshingly Australian slant, but this is not primarily a book for libertarians. Berg emphasises that ‘The type of libertarianism that I am describing here is a moderate one, not a radical one. It has more than ample room for a simple, non-intrusive welfare net’ (p. 79). It is unclear if this view is moderate rather than ‘radical’ on grounds of principle, preference or tactics. The book is clear, however, about libertarian differences with conservative views and the Liberal Party government’s stance on immigration, the ‘war on terror’, same-sex marriage and free speech. The perspective is mainly addressing the politically non-aligned and the rational left, cogently arguing that a libertarian alternative offers better solutions for issues that they are concerned about.

Tactics for the advocacy of liberty can lead to vigorous debates between essentially like-minded people. It is increasingly common for those who fought battles against the left on campus in the 1970s and 1980s and saw the retreat of state power through privatisation, tax reform, some measure of de-regulation and the joyous period for liberty after the fall of the Berlin wall to bemoan a contemporary zeitgeist that seems to see the state extending its power on every front. It looks like the work of free market think tanks, thoughtful academics and policy wonks has done little to thwart the ever growing power of the administrative state that Chris Berg does his bit to document.

Is the task of promoting liberty an exercise for a small remnant that we can only hope will be remembered by our children and successors in more friendly times for freedom? In his famous 1949 essay ‘The Intellectuals and Socialism, Hayek ruminated that ‘It may be that as free a society as we have known it carries within itself the forces of its own destruction, that once freedom is achieved it is taken for granted

and ceases to be valued’ (p. 383). He then asked, ‘Does this mean that freedom is valued only when it is lost, that the world must everywhere go through a dark phase of socialist totalitarianism before the forces of freedom can gather strength anew?’ (p. 383).

Berg’s work is more hopeful. He makes the case to ‘gather strength anew’, because now is a time when the libertarian alternative is more than ever the best answer to our problems. Technology is increasingly making state-based solutions unnecessary and providing powerful incentives to move away from the state. Many state controls over media content, communications or labour are redundant when data is digital and unionised industries are replaced with automated alternatives. Political solutions are failing and people distrust politicians more than ever before since politicians’ answers seem bound by dated left-right divisions.

Arguing that neither political party in Australia nor politicians nor civil servants have much to offer that helps human liberty—and that their actions usually erode those freedoms—gives this work a quintessentially libertarian flavour. If it moves the window of policy possibility even a little in favour of liberty, we can then quibble that Berg makes no case against a more radical vision of a stateless libertarianism that is more consistent with the principles he espouses and that is arguably a more compelling vision.

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