

Introduction to Liberal history

In our series of short introductory articles, **James Moore** reviews one of the most well-known and widely quoted works of Liberal philosophy.

John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*

JOHN STUART MILL'S 1859 essay *On Liberty* is probably the best-known statement of Liberal thought ever published.¹ It is often seen as the foundational text of a distinctively British form of Liberalism that spread around the world and strongly influenced Liberal parties in the Americas and across the British Commonwealth. The document is the symbol of office of the Liberal Democrat Presidency, a copy being presented to each new President on taking office.

One suspects, however, that few Liberal Democrats today pause to review its contents or reflect on how its messages might influence their own approach to Liberalism. In this short introduction we will provide an overview of Mill's core ideas and ask the difficult question: would Mill regard the Liberal Democrats as a Liberal party?

At one level, Mill's approach to liberty was quite simple. The liberty of the individual was paramount:

...that the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering

with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection. That the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilised community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant ...

In the part which merely concerns himself, his independence is, of right, absolute. Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign.²

For Mill, individual liberty was essential for the development of the human personality and for the dignity of every civilised human being. Liberty was also the only consistent and permanent source of human improvement.³ Knowledge did not progress simply through the collection of new ideas about the world or new facts, but through the clash of freely expressed thoughts and opinions in an environment that fostered free debate.

Mill is sometimes criticised for not offering a more

developed definition of harm, but it is clear from *On Liberty* and his later writings that he felt the harm must be real and significant; liberty should not be taken away just to prevent someone feeling hurt or offended. The greatest harm that could be done to an individual and civil society was the suppression of individual liberty and free expression.

Mill was not just concerned with the tyranny of the state over the individual, but also with the tyranny of dominant opinions, that could be just as corrosive to individual freedom as institutional constraints over action. Like John Locke and many subsequent reformers, Mill advocated political and religious toleration, but believed that toleration was always under threat from the tyranny of dominant schools of thought and opinion, especially when they went unchallenged. Free speech and free debate meant that dominant ideas could never become tyrannical – that they would be placed under constant test and could be rejected or modified when found wanting. No individual could therefore be justified in the suppression of the views of

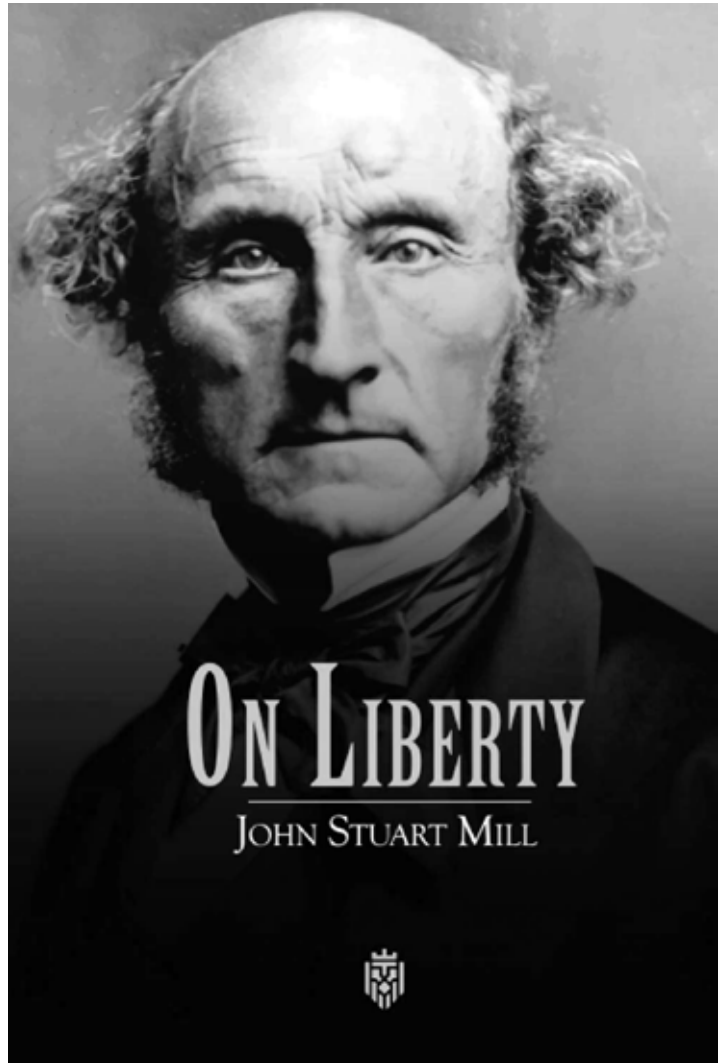
another. We see this famous position stated in his second chapter:

If all mankind minus one were of one opinion, and only one person were of the contrary opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person, than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind.⁴

Thus Mill presents us with not only a model for individual human happiness, dignity and fulfilment, he also demonstrates how free speech and freedom of action drives human progress.

Of course, on first reading the modern reader may find some aspects of *On Liberty* and Mill's wider ideas about progress somewhat problematic. Mill was writing for an educated audience in 1859 and took it for granted that citizens needed certain qualities in order to participate fully in a political community. A certain degree of education and culture were assumed prerequisites, but it is important to understand that he felt that most individuals could attain these prerequisites in the right circumstances – including, controversially for the time, most women.

Similarly, although he supported the development of the British Empire, he did so in the belief that Britain's liberal approach to empire



would be the most effective way to spread modern education and liberal values to those who were yet to benefit from it. Liberal societies were not something that sprang up naturally, but were products of specific historical circumstances that favoured the development of a large middle class. Here we can see the echoes of Aristotle's ideas about the importance of a middle class for political stability and

progress. This did not, however, mean that Mill was hostile to working-class political claims – he instead implied that the labouring classes would ultimately be incorporated into the middle classes through the growth of education, culture and wealth.

Although Mill's essay was published in 1859, the year that the Liberal Party was formed, it was in no sense a statement of party

philosophy. The Liberal Party of 1859 was a complex coalition of Whigs, Radicals and followers of the former Tory Prime Minister Sir Robert Peel. The term 'Liberal' had originated in the 1820s, but had taken several decades to form into a distinctive political approach that favoured free trade and administrative reform, while opposing corruption and excessive taxation. At local level, Liberal Associations were often uneasy alliances between rival Whig and Radical factions. In two-member constituencies this rivalry often resulted in each faction putting up its own candidate, with sometimes bitter arguments arising when older members retired. It is not, then, surprising, that the new party issued no statement of political position – indeed, the modern party manifesto itself did not arrive until the late 1870s.

Stefan Collini has attempted to trace the changing reputation of Mill over time, from, in his words, 'sectarian radical to national possession'.⁵ It is certainly important to note that public reactions to Mill's 1859 essay were somewhat mixed. Although widely respected as a thinker, many of his ideas were regarded as being on the extreme political fringe. His radical views on women's political and social emancipation and his criticisms of marriage placed him open to charges of eccentricity. His

close relationship with a married woman, the radical feminist Harriet Taylor Mill, also raised eyebrows in elite circles; his later marriage to her after her first husband's death did little to silence wagging tongues.

He was a polite and interesting controversialist, but not the leader of a political movement. Unlike the modern liberal political philosopher John Rawls, he was not courted by presidents or prime ministers or, indeed, offered any significant role in the Liberal Party. When elected as an MP for the City of Westminster in 1865 he did so on a very radical platform that included votes for women. While he played a prominent role in the debates to extend the parliamentary franchise, famously putting down an unsuccessful amendment on 20 May 1867 to enfranchise women, his parliamentary career was short. He lost his seat at the 1868 general election; he was somewhat relieved to leave the political arena, as he found active politics uncongenial.

Mill's death on 5 May 1873 received mixed coverage in the national press. *The Times* newspaper famously noted that he was kind-hearted but 'often wrong-headed',⁶ while the 'advanced' Liberal press noted the passing of a respected figure, but implied that his ideas had, as yet, enjoyed only marginal impact on public debate.⁷ David Stack goes one step further and

suggests that the premature publication of Mill's *Autobiography* in the same year further undermined his wider reputation.⁸ Some read it as endorsing adultery and birth control, while others viewed it as a reason for censorship laws to protect public morality. Not only were Mill's ideas on free speech and expression still not widely accepted, his own writings were being cited as the very reason for restrictions. However, one also has to appreciate the wider context. While in 1867 Liberalism and reform were on the march, by the end of 1873 the Liberal government was, to use Disraeli's words, 'a range of exhausted volcanoes'. Outside Westminster the excesses of the Paris Commune and Irish nationalism meant that public opinion was more immediately concerned with public order and stability than individual freedom.

It took the final three decades of the nineteenth century for the reputation of Mill and *On Liberty* to be restored. Radicals such as E.J. Holyoake and 'Manchester School' Liberals such as Jacob Bright kept his wider ideas alive, while the Liberal individualism evident in *On Liberty* gradually became associated with mainstream Gladstonian Liberalism as Gladstone moved in a more radical direction and became 'the People's William'. Indeed, it was soon the case that many Liberal thinkers felt the need to justify

their positions with reference to Mill's work. Mill's views about widening the franchise, the emancipation of women and the importance of freedom of expression fitted much more with the spirit of the Edwardian age than the era in which his work was written. During the first two decades of the twentieth century, when the words of Marx and Engels were being more widely read by a new generation of working-class radicals, Mill offered a powerful intellectual antidote of Liberal individualism.

Yet Mill also presented something of a problem for supporters of what became known as the New Liberalism. At a time when Liberals were increasingly willing to use the state and higher taxation to tackle social problems, Mill's more individualistic views on personal responsibility and public action were something of a difficulty. Many thinkers tried to square the old Liberalism of Gladstone, Morley and Mill with the New Liberalism of Asquith and Lloyd George. L.T. Hobhouse's famous book *Liberalism* (1911) argued that there was justification within Mill's ideas for greater state intervention.⁹ After all, had Mill not noted the importance of removing constraints from individuals in order that they could become citizens and participate in the political community? Was poverty and ignorance not a constraint that needed removal? Didn't

Mill allow for state intervention to prevent harm to the liberty of others? Hobhouse thus offered a reinterpretation of Liberalism that emphasised not just the negative freedom from constraints but the positive freedom to act.

Whether these intellectual gymnastics were a fair reflection or extension of Mill's own views is open to question. Certainly, those who followed the school of Gladstone and Morley were not convinced and there remained in the Liberal Party a large number of Liberals who were sceptical of the New Liberalism. There were also many who believed that New Liberalism did not go far enough. The fragmentation of Liberalism in the twentieth century cannot be put down simply to the divisions between the rival camps of Lloyd George and Asquith; perhaps a more fundamental division was between rival intellectual interpretations of Liberalism – a debate in which *On Liberty* continued to be important.

By the 1950s Liberal manifestos owed much more to the economic and welfare interventionism of John Maynard Keynes and William Beveridge than John Stuart Mill. Yet there were many who sought to emphasise the continuing importance of Mill's views in the new age of collectivism. Clement Davies' leadership speeches during the 1951 election echoed an individualism that could have

been taken directly from Mill, despite the party's commitment to Keynesianism and the welfare state. Neither did the resignation of Davies as party leader and the death of the 'last Gladstonian Liberal', Sir Rhys Hopkin Morris, in 1956 mark the end of Mill's influence in the party or elsewhere. Britain's most famous post-war political philosopher, Isaiah Berlin, in his famous 'Two Concepts of Liberty', saw Mill's notion of 'negative liberty' as an important bulwark against the authoritarian political tendencies of modernity, and warned how 'positive liberty' had been distorted to empower nationalists and autocrats.¹⁰ F.A. Hayek, the architect of the post-war classical liberal revival, praised Mill in several parts of his renowned *Constitution of Liberty*.¹¹ Liberals Oliver Smedley and Arthur Seldon formed two-thirds of the triumvirate that created the Institute of Economic Affairs, arguably one of the most important classical liberal think-tanks of modern times, and one highly influential on Conservative thought in the 1970s.

Even for those who remained faithful to the Liberal Party, Mill remained significant. For Liberals campaigning for civil rights in the 1960s, Mill's thoughts on freedom of speech, expression and lifestyle had strong resonance, even if his views about the limited state were

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less frequently recited or understood. The intellectual traditions represented by Mill certainly helped the Liberal Party articulate distinctive views on what were then unpopular subjects, particularly on questions of gay equality. Yet there were those within the Liberal Party who were worried that British Liberalism was losing its wider identity and morphing into what might be termed a form of welfare corporatism. Following his retirement as party leader, Jo Grimond authored a number of works that echoed Mill's views on Liberal individualism and criticised the collectivist tendencies of the Liberal Party in the 1970s.¹² The emergence of the SDP raised the issue of whether Liberalism and Social Democracy had essentially the same goals. When the SDP and Liberal Party formed a political alliance, some commentators joked that it worked because the SDP was led by a Liberal (Roy Jenkins) and the Liberals by a Social Democrat (David Steel). Critics worried that the 1983 manifesto was a defence of a corporatist consensus that had long since disappeared.

After the merger of the SDP and the Liberal Party, concerns over the identity of British Liberalism remained. Mill is still an important reference text for those who express concerns about some of the collectivist and paternalistic strands of Liberal Democrat thinking. It is doubtful, for example,

whether Mill would have had much truck with punitive taxes and restrictions on cigarettes, alcohol or fatty foods. For Mill, people should be able to make their own decisions and mistakes unless it could be demonstrated that those choices directly harmed others. Both Mill and Berlin warned that the bar of harm should be set very high, or all manner of restrictions on individual freedom could be justified by a dominant group or body of opinion. Their message was clear – fear the paternalists who are doing things to you for your own good.

Mill also provides uncomfortable reading for those who wish to police our thoughts and speech, or even to ban those who challenge orthodoxy (even a supposedly progressive orthodoxy). It is very doubtful that he would have supported the expulsion of party members (from any party) simply because they held unfashionable views or because they offended or upset another group of people within it. For Mill, the clash of ideas was essential for preventing the tyranny of ideas. Robust conflict was essential for political life and no group or individual should be safe from criticism. Mill believed in diversity of lifestyles, but he did not believe that citizens should be required to support, endorse or validate specific lifestyle choices of others. Nor did he believe all lifestyle choices necessarily equally

sensible; the value of lifestyle choices was something open to debate. For Mill the most important form of diversity was diversity of opinion. Compelling people to attend training courses in which they are compelled to think in a particular way or endorse particular lifestyle choices would appal him. Forcing someone from their job for failing to use approved language would also offend Mill's fundamental principles, even if that action is supported by majority or elite opinion. As we saw earlier, for Mill, one of the greatest tyrannies was the tyranny of majority or elite opinion. Views must be formed freely. Liberalism cannot be imposed, however strong the temptation to try might be.

For all the references that one finds to Mill in Liberal Democrat discourse, one wonders if the Liberal Democrats really are very liberal in the sense that Mill might have wished. Of course, all parties represent amalgams of intellectual traditions, but how far is Mill present in the core of Liberal Democrat philosophy? The preamble to the party constitution states that the Liberal Democrats seek to create a society in which no one would be enslaved by 'poverty, ignorance or conformity', a sentiment that would have met with Mill's approval. However, another part of the document offends against the main notion of *On Liberty*. It claims that the Liberal Democrats

seek to create a society in which they seek 'to balance the fundamental values of liberty, equality and community'. Even leaving aside the questions of whether 'community' can be a value, it is doubtful whether Liberals in the tradition of Mill would favour balancing liberty against anything. This was a point well made by critics during the party merger debates in 1988, who argued Liberals stand for liberty above all else.¹³ Liberty is the route to self-fulfilment and self-realisation. It is essential for the dignity of every man and woman. Without it there can be no meaningful social progress and no genuinely free communities. Arguably, it is this inherent respect for the individual that set Liberalism apart from Socialist and Conservative world views. A critic might say that the failure to articulate this core philosophical point may be one reason why the Liberal Democrats have often struggled to offer a clear sense of their own identity – or, perhaps, to provide a compelling vision of a genuinely Liberal future.

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- 1 There is a very large body of scholarly literature on Mill's Liberalism and wider political philosophy. Good starting points and recent works include: J. Skorupski, *Why Read Mill today?* (2006), G. Scarre, *Mill's On Liberty: A Reader's Guide* (2007), N. Urbinati, *Mill on Democracy: From the Athenian Polis to Representative Government* (2002), B. Kinzer, *J.S. Mill Revisited: Biographical and Political Explorations* (2007), R. Reeve, *J.S. Mill, Victorian Firebrand* (2007).
- 2 Mill, *On Liberty* (1859), p. 23.
- 3 Mill, *On Liberty*, p. 171.
- 4 Mill, *On Liberty*, p. 95
- 5 S. Collini, 'From sectarian radical to national possession: John Stuart Mill in English culture, 1873-1945,' in M. Laine (ed), *A cultivated mind: essays on J.S. Mill presented to John M. Robson* (Toronto 1991), 242-72.
- 6 *The Times*, 10 May 1873.
- 7 There were some significant variations in Liberal assessments. Perhaps the most fulsome praise came in the *Examiner*, 10 May 1873.
- 8 D. Stack, 'The Death of John Stuart Mill,' *The Historical Journal*, 54, 1 (2011), pp. 167-190. J.S. Mill, *Autobiography* (1873).
- 9 L.T. Hobhouse, *Liberalism* (1911).
- 10 I. Berlin, 'Two concepts of Liberty' (1958) republished in I Berlin, *Liberty* (2004).
- 11 F.A. Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty* (1960).
- 12 J. Grimond, *The Common Welfare* (1978), J. Grimond, *A Personal Manifesto* (1983).
- 13 The preamble to the Liberal party constitution was much more unequivocal in support of individual liberty. See <https://liberalconstitution.wordpress.com/2-2/> [Accessed 08/0923]

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