

A restraint of liberty

Faced with a choice between market freedom and human life, governments have chosen to preserve the former

The British government recognises two kinds of freedom. There is the freedom of the citizen, which it appears to perceive as a threat to good order. It has permitted (through the Serious Organised Crime Act) the police or courts to ban any public protest. It is introducing identity cards, restricting immigration, seeking to curb the right of habeas corpus and extending antisocial behaviour orders.

Then there is the freedom of business. Though the Inland Revenue and Customs and Excise are already incapable of dealing with tax evaders, Gordon Brown is cutting 10,000 of their staff. Tony Blair is trying to destroy the European working time directive, which prevents companies from working their employees to death. The draconian measures in the Queen's speech restraining the citizen were immediately followed by a promise to deregulate business. The government is prepared to micro-manage us, while leaving the more powerful agents – the corporations – free to manage themselves.

Like the patricians in *Coriolanus*, Tony Blair will “repeal daily any wholesome act established against the rich, and provide more piercing statutes daily, to chain up and restrain the poor”. For business to be free, we must be kept in check.

This isn't, according to the high priest of this religion, how it was meant to be. Adam Smith held that market freedom was desirable for one reason: that it improved people's lives. Where he perceived that it had the opposite effect, he called for restraint. “Those exertions of the natural liberty of a few individuals, which might endanger the security

MONBIOT | A RESTRAINT OF LIBERTY

of the whole society, are, and ought to be, restrained by the laws of all governments,” he wrote. Governments have “the duty of protecting, as far as possible, every member of the society from the injustice or oppression of every other member of it”.

Such warnings were of course ignored. Sixty years later, John Clare surveyed the devastation wrought by the new liberties. “Thus came enclosure – ruin was its guide / But freedom’s clapping hands enjoyed the sight / Though comfort’s cottage soon was thrust aside / And workhouse prisons raised upon the site.”

But the most breathtaking contradiction of the past week was the prime minister’s demand for respect: for everyone except those whose lives we are destroying. We might no longer be allowed to wear hooded tops in public places, but we will remain free to kill the people of south Asia.

Though Tony Blair has acknowledged that climate change will radically alter human existence, there were no new proposals to tackle it in the Queen’s speech. Figures published by the Office for National Statistics last week show that greenhouse gas emissions from flights by UK residents almost doubled between 1990 and 2003, while emissions from private cars rose by 14%. Britain’s carbon dioxide production is supposed to fall to 80% of 1990 levels by 2010, but even before the air transport figures are counted, it has risen in the past two years. Only government intervention could put us back on course, but Blair has already filled up his legislative programme: his contribution to solving the problem will now, it seems, be rhetorical.

It is not just that we are free to kill other people; market freedom constrains us to do so. The economy is so organised as to make it almost impossible to do the right thing. If your village isn’t served by public transport and there is nowhere safe to cycle, you have, for all the talk of freedom to drive, no choice. If the superstores have shut down all the small shops, you must give your money to a company whose purchasing and distribution networks look like a plan for maximum environmental impact.

So we are encouraged by the market and left free by the law to inflict the most grievous harm that any group of people has ever inflicted on any other. There are several good reasons for supposing that climate change, within the course of this century, will throw the world into food deficit. The glaciers of the Himalayas, which feed the great rivers watering the farmland keeping Asia alive, are disappearing. As the temperature rises, plant growth in the tropics is likely to slow down: already this appears to be happening to rice crops in the Philippines. Drought zones are expanding: even in the early 1990s the nomadic people I worked with in east Africa were complaining that the 40-year famine cycle had been compressed to four or five.

Already, with a net food surplus, some 800 million people on earth are permanently malnourished. With a net food deficit, this figure could rise into the billions. We will be

MONBIOT | A RESTRAINT OF LIBERTY

responsible for this. By the time we reach the end of our lives, every one of us, however kind and mild and well-meaning we might be, will have been responsible for the equivalent, in terms of human suffering, of a medium-sized act of terrorism.

Climate change reverses Smith's central dictum: that "by pursuing his own interest [a man] frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it". Now the interests of global society will be served primarily by restraint.

Everything we thought was good turns out also to be bad. It is an act of kindness to travel to your cousin's wedding. Now it is also an act of cruelty. It is a good thing to light the streets at night. Climate change tells us it kills more people than it saves. We are killing people by the most innocent means: turning on the lights, taking a bath, driving to work, going on holiday. Climate change demands a reversal of our moral compass, for which we are plainly unprepared. It is hardly surprising that no government really wants to confront us. It is left to Greenpeace, which occupied the Range Rover factory last week, to restrict the exercise of market freedom that Blair refuses to touch.

As Gordon Brown, the man who keeps the markets free, says, "what is morally wrong cannot be economically right". In terms of raw GDP, Adam Smith's "perfect liberties" are economically right. No one who has understood the threat of climate change could fail to see that they are also morally wrong.

The Economist argued recently that the best means of solving this problem is through greater market freedom: this, of course, is the cure it prescribes for all ills, even before it has investigated the nature of the disease. The problem is that the deaths of people in Bangladesh or Somalia cost us nothing: we have no financial incentive to minimise them. Carbon trading, in its current form, rewards the polluting companies most responsible for the problem. It reminds me of the contract won by Degussa, a company which had supplied Zyklon B to the gas chambers, to provide the protective coating for Berlin's Holocaust memorial: they are profiting twice from mass death.

We can deal with climate change only with the help of governments, restraining the exertions of our natural liberties. So far, however, when confronted with a choice between the two sacred commodities – market freedom and human life - the one they have chosen to preserve is market freedom.