

Lefty liberals?

By Radical Randy

Now that the candidate John McCain described as the biggest liberal in the U.S. Senate has been elected president, social justice advocates can rejoice, right? Barack Obama's choice of Wall Street insiders for financial advice and his plans for an Afghanistan troop surge should remind us not to conflate "liberal" with "left-wing progressive."

So who are these liberals?

Liberal values and policies are commonly considered to include formal legal equality for all, guaranteeing civil rights, affirmative action, women's rights, access to abortion, greater sexual freedom and relaxed social mores, gay rights/marriage, marijuana decriminalization, gun control, and greater leniency in dealing with crime. Also included are the promotion of cultural diversity and multiculturalism, the separation of church and state and freedom of the press (at least for those who can afford one).

What is vitally important to realize is that these are social/cultural values, which may well be generally embraced by people on the political left, but which leave the fundamental nature of our economic system unchallenged. Herds of liberals may be found roaming anti-poverty events, wringing their hands in sympathy while supporting the very system that ensures people remain impoverished. Economically/politically a liberal may still champion capitalism and American imperialism as fanatically as any social conservative. Many of the wealthy elites may themselves be socially liberal. During the civil rights movements of the 1950s, '60s, and '70s, liberals sought to make everyone, regardless of race, gender, religion, or sexual orientation, a player in the capitalist economy, destined to either exploit or be exploited. They simply added more people with their eyes on the prize to the system without changing the nature of the system itself. A limousine liberal may have no objection to hoarding vast wealth by exploiting workers and the poor as long as they aren't being discriminated against in the process.

The 18th Century revolutions inspired by the liberalism of the Enlightenment, with its increased emphasis on the rights of the individual, provided a liberatory force against the old entrenched aristocracy. However, the liberal values of unfettered economic self-interest and individualism have mutated into the mad pursuit of wealth at all costs under the "free market" *laissez-faire* supremacy of neoliberalism.

Liberals, including many in America, have opposed the invasions or destabilizations by the U.S. or its proxies. However, this was often due more to a pragmatic disagreement over the effectiveness of strategy or concern over the excessive financial or human costs of the operation, rather than principled opposition to American aggression or its economic goals. Some just want more bang for the buck or a less messy means of achieving the same end. Liberals may back U.S. invasions provided this "nation-building" imposes some mangled caricature of democracy on the victim state.

A major liberal focus has been redressing past and ongoing injustices to groups facing discrimination. This has led to a fairer society, but preoccupation with these matters to the exclusion of all other considerations by some liberals can lead to a diversion from the pursuit of a more just world for all. Rather than creating a unified front, the focus on identity politics risks splintering the movement for social and economic justice. It plays into the hands of right-wing pundits, making it easy for them to lampoon liberal “political correctness.” It has also allowed conservatives to engineer the “culture wars” backlash that served to alienate the broader public from liberals and, by association, the left.

Liberal parties

The major Canadian and U.S. political parties generally considered liberal are the Liberals and Democrats. In the 20th Century, John F. Kennedy and Bill Clinton were liberal Democratic presidents, but they certainly weren't shy about using the American military and its allies abroad in pursuit of U.S. political, strategic, and economic objectives. Jean Chretien's Liberal government went merrily along with the Afghanistan invasion. They only publicly backed off of involving Canada in the Iraq Coalition in the face of huge protests throughout the country, but did quietly provide several warships to a fleet protecting U.S. aircraft carriers operating against Iraq.

Economically, Clinton and Chretien were more than willing to use the deficit panic of the mid-'90s to savage social programs. It was also these two leaders who pushed the soft imperialism of the corporate “free trade” bills of rights such as NAFTA and the World Trade Organization (WTO). Just as conservative parties may be elected by appealing to social conservatives, the liberal parties may achieve power through the votes of social liberals. In either case, the public usually winds up with a politically/economically right-wing government.

Oh, that liberal media!

Perhaps nothing arouses conservative ire more than the “left-wing liberal unpatriotic mass media.” The mainstream mass media is generally sympathetic to liberal social values but, of far more significance, it is corporate, owned by corporate conglomerates and deriving most of its revenue from corporate advertising. As such, it overwhelmingly promotes neoliberal capitalism and glorifies the U.S. military. Corporate media enthusiastically supported “free trade” and demanded the huge Wall Street bailouts, with minor reforms to patch-up the system. Any doubts as to the true loyalty of the liberal media vanished with the 9/11 hype and hysteria. Rather than carrying out actual journalism, the context-free corporate media echo chamber amplified every Bush administration lie and distortion in the stampede to the Iraq war. The Canadian liberal press pushed for involvement in the Iraq invasion and continues backing the Afghan occupation with their knee-jerk campaign to “support our troops” (i.e. support our war) campaign. If mainstream corporate media does actually report on any American misdeeds or aggression or an excess of greed by big business it is immediately lambasted by the far right corporate media for its left-wing liberal bias.

Hollywood's entertainment industry may be socially liberal, pushing the boundary of acceptable taste but, with rare exceptions, generally promotes the values of the capitalist system itself and promotes American chauvinism and its materialistic and consumer values. This has become even more blatant since the rise of reality television and its celebration of the greed-driven, win-at-any-cost ethos.

Will the real left please stand up?

Left-wing economic and political activists tend to share liberal values of individual rights but go far beyond this to demand economic and social justice. This includes a good living wage, benefits, effective unions, full access to Medicare, education, social programs, and affordable housing regardless of income, redistribution of wealth, local empowerment, and the preservation of culture and the environment rather than aggrandizement of commercial interests. Globally the left pursues fair trade rather than exploitive "free trade" and international cooperation and peaceful people-centered development rather than intimidation, invasion, and war. In practice this effectively means an end to rampaging neoliberal capitalism, especially global capitalism in the form of the WTO, NAFTA, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund among others. Also to be eliminated is corporate rule, that is ownership/control of the economy, mass media, and government by corporations and their wealthy major shareholders as well as the rights enjoyed by corporations as "artificial persons" under the law. The left also opposes economic and military imperialism and today this primarily means standing against the American Empire. In spirit all this may be summed up as putting people ahead of money, making the economy the servant to the people, rather than their master.

The "tax and spend" liberals of the conservative legend may occasionally implement programs to help the less well-off members of society, but these often resemble band-aid programs more than any fundamental change to the system. This is not to suggest that these liberal programs are of no value. The mild socialism of Franklin Roosevelt's Depression era New Deal, Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society," and Canada-wide Medicare brought in by a minority Liberal government under pressure from the NDP benefited many poor and middle class families. The liberal parties, though generally not any more disposed to challenge corporate rule than their conservative counterparts, do have far more room at their periphery for people advocating genuine change. However, those espousing actual left-wing economic policies that threaten entrenched power can expect to be marginalized or demonized by the party apparatus and mainstream corporate media, especially if they seek leadership positions. Of course, this doesn't mean the left can't form tactical alliances with liberals to oppose wars or advance social causes.

It is by working with those who truly share our goals that we can hope to end poverty, homelessness, and war and bring about a more equitable society. None of this should be taken to imply that there aren't liberals working for social justice or left-wing causes, only that it cannot be automatically taken for granted that someone is an economically left-wing progressive simply because they are identified as liberal. Lefty liberals? Not necessarily.