

## 2.2 Liberalism

### Introduction

Whereas conservatives traditionally emphasise the role of society in shaping individuals, liberals place a greater emphasis on the importance of the individual. Liberal society is to be formed of free individuals, autonomous and equally valuable. Government intervention in relations between individuals should be considered only when existing practices threaten individual autonomy or freedom. Therefore, legitimate government action centres on protecting the individual. Over time, this liberal view of deregulated 'small government', where people interact freely, has been tempered by a realisation that, without some regulation, abuses can occur. In practice, therefore, traditional ('classical') liberalism has become moderated by the need to protect people from a form of capitalism that appears to restrict freedom.

### Main facets of liberalism

#### Rationality

John Locke believed in rational thought over dogmatism. He believed that differences of opinion were inevitable and that free and rational individuals should – as far as possible – be allowed to resolve problems without the need for oppressive state intervention. There would in effect be ...

#### Government by consent

Jean Jacques Rousseau in *The Social Contract* (1762) put forward the idea that men gave up natural freedom in return for social freedom. They could not, therefore, do all that they could in their natural state, but they would gain from the greater protection afforded in a society in which all men gave up their freedom to certain things. This would lead to a ...

#### Limited government

... where there might be a separation of powers – along the lines advocated by writers such as Montesquieu – between executive, legislative and judicial branches. There might then be a system of checks and balances between branches, which would protect the people from any one branch becoming dominant and infringing those ...

#### Toleration

... would become the norm and different traditions could be valued and respected. There could be an equality of opportunity, regardless of background.

#### Inalienable rights

... considered vital for individual fulfilment: equality before the law, freedom of expression etc. (Ch 14). In so doing, liberals would create a society in which ...

### A liberal view of human nature

Liberals have a generally positive view of human nature. Some early liberals saw men as self-seeking and egotistical, but later writers believed that humans are rational and compassionate, if corruptible. Liberals place the emphasis on guidance (encouragement for individuals to develop in the right direction); they believe that individuals, given choices, can be helped to make the decisions that benefit them and society at large.

### Different forms of liberalism

#### Classical liberalism

Particularly common in the nineteenth century, classical liberalism saw minimal state intervention as being the ideal. There was an emphasis on freedom, toleration and equality. Individuals were rational and had choices to make. Classical liberalism emphasised the desirability of self-help and self-improvement.

#### New/progressive liberalism

The social impact of industrialisation – particularly its more exploitative face – made many liberals realise that greater regulation might be needed. The market could not be allowed to go unchecked. Self-help would not be enough. There was a need for state provision of schools and hospitals. Pensions and unemployment benefit could be provided. Such ideas were put forward by writers such as T H Green and, later, L T Hobhouse. John Maynard Keynes and William Beveridge provided the basis for the mixed economy and welfare statism of the years following the Second World War.

#### Neo-liberalism

Often associated with the 'New Right', neo-liberalism involved 'rolling back the frontiers of the state'; ending or at least minimising state provision/intervention. It was a return to classical liberal ideas of self-help and equality of opportunity rather than outcome. Neo-liberals once again emphasised the centrality of the market in providing for the needs of individuals.