

## **How to be a Conservative-Liberal-Socialist**

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Motto: "Please step forward to the rear!" This is an approximate translation of a request I once heard on a tramcar in Warsaw. I propose it as a slogan for the mighty International that will never exist.

A Conservative Believes:

1. That in human life there never have been and never will be improvements that are not paid for with deteriorations and evils; thus, in considering each project of reform and amelioration, its price has to be assessed. Put another way, innumerable evils are compatible (i.e. we can suffer them comprehensively and simultaneously); but many goods limit or cancel each other, and therefore we will never enjoy them fully at the same time. A society in which there is no equality and no liberty of any kind is perfectly possible, yet a social order combining total equality and freedom is not. The same applies to the compatibility of planning and the principle of autonomy, to security and technical progress. Put yet another way, there is no happy ending in human history.

2. That we do not know the extent to which various traditional forms of social life-- families, rituals, nations, religious communities--are indispensable if life in a society is to be tolerable or even possible. There are no grounds for believing that when we destroy these forms, or brand them as irrational, we increase the chance of happiness, peace, security, or freedom. We have no certain knowledge of what might occur if, for example, the monogamous family was abrogated, or if the time-honored custom of burying the dead were to give way to the rational recycling of corpses for industrial purposes. But we would do well to expect the worst.

3. That the *idée fixe* of the Enlightenment -- that envy, vanity, greed, and aggression are all caused by the deficiencies of social institutions and that they will be swept away once these institutions are reformed -- is not only utterly incredible and contrary to all experience, but is highly dangerous. How on earth did all these institutions arise if they were so contrary to the true nature of man? To hope that we can institutionalize brotherhood, love, and altruism is already to have a reliable blueprint for despotism.

A Liberal Believes:

1. That the ancient idea that the purpose of the State is security still remains valid. It remains valid even if the notion of "security" is expanded to include not only the protection of persons and property by means of the law, but also various provisions of insurance: that people should not starve if they are jobless; that the poor should not be condemned to die through lack of medical help; that children should have free access to education--all these are also part of security. Yet security should never be confused with liberty. The State does not guarantee freedom by action and by regulating various areas

of life, but by doing nothing. In fact security can be expanded only at the expense of liberty. In any event, to make people happy is not the function of the State.

2. That human communities are threatened not only by stagnation but also by degradation when they are so organized that there is no longer room for individual initiative and inventiveness. The collective suicide of mankind is conceivable, but a permanent human ant-heap is not, for the simple reason that we are not ants.

3. That it is highly improbable that a society in which all forms of competitiveness have been done away with would continue to have the necessary stimuli for creativity and progress. More equality is not an end in itself, but only a means. In other words, there is no point to the struggle for more equality if it results only in the leveling down of those who are better off, and not in the raising up of the underprivileged. Perfect equality is a self-defeating ideal.

A Socialist Believes:

1. That societies in which the pursuit of profit is the sole regulator of the productive system are threatened with as grievous--perhaps more grievous--catastrophes as are societies in which the profit motive has been entirely eliminated from the production-regulating forces. There are good reasons why freedom of economic activity should be limited for the sake of security, and why money should not automatically produce more money. But the limitation of freedom should be called precisely that, and should not be called a higher form of freedom.

2. That it is absurd and hypocritical to conclude that, simply because a perfect, conflictless society is impossible, every existing form of inequality is inevitable and all ways of profit-making justified. The kind of conservative anthropological pessimism which led to the astonishing belief that a progressive income tax was an inhuman abomination is just as suspect as the kind of historical optimism on which the Gulag Archipelago was based.

3. That the tendency to subject the economy to important social controls should be encouraged, even though the price to be paid is an increase in bureaucracy. Such controls, however, must be exercised within representative democracy. Thus it is essential to plan institutions that counteract the menace to freedom which is produced by the growth of these very controls.

So far as I can see, this set of regulative ideas is not self-contradictory. And therefore it is possible to be a conservative-liberal-socialist. This is equivalent to saying that those three particular designations are no longer mutually exclusive options.

As for the great and powerful International which I mentioned at the outset--it will never exist, because it cannot promise people that they will be happy.

From Leszek Kolakowski, *Modernity on Endless Trial* (University of Chicago, 1990).