



# A JOURNEY WITHOUT DISTANCE – REFLECTIONS OF A SELF-PROFESSED LIBERTARIAN

*Posted on March 1, 2019 by Gene Balfour*



Recently, I have been reflecting on my journey as a self-professed Libertarian and the shifts in my thinking that have occurred over the past twelve years as a Libertarian party member. I have noticed more frequently that some colleagues with whom I have shared common views in the past on policy topics are no longer in alignment with my views.

I acknowledge that I have changed. I have slid in and out of various “camps” of Libertarian conviction over the years. My experience within the Libertarian movement, which has been responsible for my evolving views, has included:

I was elected Chairman of the Ontario Libertarian Party (OLP) in 2017 with the mandate to recruit and prepare 124 OLP candidates for the June 2018 Ontario Provincial election (the Conservatives won a majority under Doug Ford and handed a humiliating defeat to the incumbent Liberals under the highly unpopular Kathleen Wynne);

As the Libertarian candidate for my home riding, I learned much from being a political ‘insider’ as I had in five previous occasions as a Libertarian candidate;

Proclaimed by the former OLP Leader as the party’s “most prolific writer” (mostly on Facebook), I witnessed and learned from thousands of responses to the Libertarian content about which I wrote. [Note: social media has proved to be the best way to reach the public with our message since all mainstream media outlets consider every other party except for the three top contenders to be irrelevant and non-newsworthy.]

This personal reflection has been partially inspired by Canadian author William D. Gairdner’s book *THE GREAT DIVIDE, Why Liberals and Conservatives Will Never, Ever Agree*. It addresses a phenomenon that seems to exist at every point along the left-right continuum of political engagement, and even within political parties. The theme of his book is: “The populations of the democratic world, from Boston to Berlin, Vancouver to Venice, are becoming increasingly divided from within, due to a growing ideological incompatibility between modern liberalism and conservatism. This is partly due to a complex mutation in the concept of liberal democracy itself, and the resulting divide is now so wide that those holding to either philosophy on a whole range of topics: on democracy, on reason, on abortion, on human nature, on homosexuality and gay marriage, on freedom, on the role of courts ... and much more, can barely speak with each other without outrage (the favourite emotional response from

all sides). Clearly, civil conversation at the surface has been failing – and that could mean democracy is failing."

Mr. Gairdner's observations hit home to me personally because of my experience with the mini-divides that exist within the Libertarian parties with whom I have been associated. The perspective of time will help to explain my point.

When I first joined the Ontario Libertarian Party in 2007, the atmosphere within the leadership team and the party's most enthusiastic supporters was one of rigorous adherence to the body of Libertarian ideas that tended to the extreme: Anarcho-Capitalism. Often abbreviated as "Ancap," it is considered a faction of libertarian political philosophy that promotes individual freedoms, private property, and free markets through the removal of government. "Removal" implies wholesale privatization of all government institutions so that they must compete with non-government service providers for business without relying on the immense benefit of guaranteed tax funding to support them.

In those early days, the OLP comprised a small group of members who were mainly greying white men who shared the dream of attaining a virtually (if not entirely) government-less society. After being elected to the Executive Committee as Member at Large (MaL) around 2010, I concluded that the OLP was operating primarily as a men's club that liked to talk about attaining political success and influencing opinion across broad communities of voters, but their goals were out of reach so long as the organization stumbled along making next to no progress.

During those early years, I also began reading extensively to deepen my understanding of Libertarianism and the Austrian School of Economics which was an essential pillar undergirding any possibility of achieving and sustaining a Libertarian society if it was to ever be realized. Authors like Murray Rothbard, Ludwig von Mises, Frederick Hayek, Hans Herman Hoppe, Tom Woods and others with predominately Ancap leanings all had a profound impact on my outlook as a Libertarian. Their ideas were inspiring to say the least, but eventually I came to the conclusion that they will never be widely accepted in our western democracies.

In 2012, a new leader of the OLP was elected—Allen Small. I came to know and respect Allen when he had also been a MaL on the Executive Committee. As a former high school teacher, Allen had the attributes and talents that I felt would help the OLP to make progress as a political entity.

Over the next six years, Allen lead us through two elections. Both of these elections marked record-breaking results unseen since the OLP had been founded in 1975. Allen worked closely with Rob Brooks, an experienced political campaign manager from another party, to shape a new election platform designed to make it appear less extreme and more attractive to a broader community of supporters. Allen was also the driving force behind building a larger social media following which was crucial to our growth. His legacy as the most successful Leader of the Ontario Libertarian Party in modern times is one that has set a high bar for future leaders to surpass.

During Allen's tenure, I continued to read and gradually took a renewed interest in the OLP. As I held a very demanding job, my time was limited and I was unable to offer much assistance in support of Allen's efforts. My views on Libertarianism had also begun to shift again, and they can be best described as politically-pragmatic because I came to accept the notion that proven methods of political messaging were essential to improve electability. However, I was still privately sympathetic to Ancap ideas. In retrospect, I was gradually becoming more "minarchist" as I continued to emerge from my earlier Ancap cocoon.

Minarchism is generally viewed as a libertarian political philosophy which advocates for the state to exist in forms that function solely to protect citizens from harm, aggression, theft, breach of contract, and fraud. During the OLP buildup to the June 2018 election, I felt compelled to condense and simplify my personal understanding of what it means to be a Libertarian. Ultimately, I settled on the following statement and I printed it on my business card as OLP Chairman: "Libertarians defend and protect individual persons (their mind, body and efforts) and their property from intentional and unwanted harm and aggression imposed by others including those employed by the state."

Another shift in my thinking was also taking place as I actively campaigned on our 2018 election platform which featured a new Non-Government Options emphasis in our Libertarian vision. Integral to this vision was the necessity to introduce competition into the "public services" markets. For it to work, it is essential to eliminate all regulations that empower public institutions to operate on a monopoly basis. This will put the power of choice back into the hands of our citizens so that they can be free to patronize their choice of available service providers who best serve their unique needs and preferences. Furthermore, for citizens who prefer that services in health care or education (for example) be provided by the government, they are free to opt in as a "government customer" and pay their share of the taxes needed to sustain government operations. Conversely, for citizens who decide that they are best served by "non-government" service providers who will surely emerge to meet market

demand after existing anti-competition regulations are repealed, these people will not be required to remit taxes; they can apply these tax savings to buy private insurance policies or make direct payments to providers. I refer to this form of Libertarianism as "free choice minarchy."

The reasons why I remain a "free choice minarchist" today is because of the obvious advantages it brings to all voters. First, for citizens who choose "non-government" service providers, payments will not be managed by an inefficient, impersonal, expensive and often inflexible "middle man"—the government bureaucracy that collects our hard-earned money through non-optional taxation.

Second, free markets have a proven history of spawning business model innovations and prudent capital investments in order to control costs and improve the pricing and quality of their products as well as their customer service reputations. All of this is derived in direct response to the ever-present forces of competition. It's no mystery that "the customer is king" in competitive businesses, but the same cannot be said within government operations.

Third, everyone gets what they want by being free to choose from viable alternatives. The thinking goes that it is none of my business what my neighbour wants to buy and it's none of my neighbour's business concerning what I prefer, so why should any drama exist between us as to how we meet our needs and preferences.

Fourth, government expenses are directly proportional to the number of regulations that are "on the books" and must be enforced with expensive resources. By eliminating all pro-monopoly regulations, the government will have lower enforcement costs and thereby require less money from taxation and/or public debt.

Fifth, this approach eliminates the element of "autocratic rule by one-size-fits-all" policy implementations which have always been the result of every election in our history. People differ in every conceivable way, which is why businesses adapt and adjust constantly to find new ways to serve customers profitably. It stands to reason that when government monopolies eliminate all consumer choices, they take on the same problems for which anti-trust laws were created to break up private sector monopolies. This double standard is hypocrisy at its most obvious. Governments must no longer operate under the protection of biased legislation if we are ever to expect service levels to improve in quality and decrease in cost.

After running in six elections as a Libertarian candidate, I am asked often why I continue to do it given our history of attaining less than 1% of the popular vote. Recently, I have been asking myself the same question. Here's why.

Maxime Bernier and his People's Party of Canada (PPC) has achieved impressive success in 5 short months since last September 2018 to build a nation-wide party complete with EDAs (Electoral District Associations) in every riding across Canada. Neither the OLP nor the Libertarian Party of Canada (LPoC) has accomplished anything even close in spite of being in existence for over 4 decades. Bernier's fund-raising ability is extraordinary. His ability to attract followers and media attention dwarfs ours. He has shown me what can be done under the right leader and the level of highly motivated talent that such a leader can attract. It is a demoralizing comparison to me as a long time OLP and LPoC member.

I consider the PPC platform shown on its web site as "Libertarian lite" insomuch as it seeks "Less Government" just as a Libertarian minarchist does. In other words, our directions are the same but only the degree of change is different.

After reading *Right Here, Right Now* by former Prime Minister Stephen Harper (for whom I have great respect), I am convinced that Harper's incremental approach to public policy change is wise. Policy results can be tested from small first steps and evaluated/adjusted before further steps are taken. This is the right approach for any elected Leader who wants Less Government and one that I would hope for if a Libertarian, PPC, or Conservative Party is elected in the upcoming federal election.

For my final, and maybe most significant consideration, I fall back on the reasons why I entered politics in the first place—my daughters. I had come to the conclusion years ago that I could not consider myself a responsible parent if I was not prepared to act to defend and protect my children from threats. To me, the greatest threat to their future has been and continues to be the unopposed and relentless growth of government power, scope, size, and cost at every level of government. The threat is manifest in an enormous set of fiscal, social, and cultural risks that will surely eat away at the quality of Liberty in their lives through no fault of their own.

Years ago, I reasoned that we do not live in a true democracy unless at least one genuine Less Government option appears on every election ballot at every level of government. Since the only true Less Government option has been the Libertarian ballot choice, I have chosen to be that candidate in my riding when no one else was prepared to do so. I knew that I had no chance to be elected, but I felt

that at least there would be one voice in each election to argue the reasons why continued government expansion was dangerous to everyone and why Less Government is the only viable antidote to these risks.

Sadly, there has never been an election in Canada that featured a Libertarian candidate on every ballot in every election riding. The best effort so far was achieved last June when the OLP ran an Ontario-wide election campaign with 116 candidates for 124 ridings even though we operated on a shoe-string budget of about \$40,000. (Note: the campaign budgets for the largest four Ontario parties was subsidized with tax dollars under the Per Vote Subsidy resulting in campaign cash windfalls of \$5.1 million (Liberals), \$4.1 million (Conservatives), \$3.2 million (NDP) and \$640,000 (Green Party). The other 22 so-called "fringe" parties that had registered with Elections Ontario for the June election and had complied with all of its campaign rules, required paper filings and fee payments, did not qualify for funding. If you are asking yourself why you were not aware of the 22 parties, you now know part of the story: running elections and reaching the public with campaign messaging is very expensive and "fringe" parties are put at a significant disadvantage to the major parties by tax subsidies.

As you can see from the above, my political path has been meandering even though I have remained a card-carrying Libertarian. As Mr. Gairdner pointed out, politicians and their most ardent supporters generally dig in for the long haul in support of their partisan convictions and are frequently loathe to budge even a smidgeon from their ideological perch.

There are likely as many Libertarians who hold stubbornly to their views, proportionately speaking, as there are ardent Liberals and Conservatives. Politics is certainly a messy business and it is easy to see why so many people avoid the topic in "polite company."

*The [photo](#) shows, "Unveiling the Statue of Liberty," by Edward Moran, painted in 1886.*

