Chapter 1

Liberalism

Liberalism is a wide-ranging political movement which has its origins in the Enlightenment. Its central value is that individuals have a fundamental right to personal freedom. However, liberals accept that liberty entails responsibility. At its minimum, this responsibility implies that the actions of an individual should not harm others or curtail the individual's own freedom. Liberals support the existence of the state and its laws to enforce this kind of responsibility. The liberal state must be formed by popular consent and must be accountable to the people. This is to ensure that it does not curtail freedom without justification. The liberal state should be limited in its scope and only act in such a way as to advance freedom and opportunity. Liberals demonstrate strong attachments to equal rights for all groups, tolerance, diversity and equality of opportunity. More recently, they have also embraced the idea of social justice, accepting that people are naturally unequal but insisting that all should have equality of opportunity, and that wealth should not be achieved at the expense of the poorer members of society. In modern politics, liberalism can be compatible with both conservative and social democratic movements.

Introduction

It could be argued that liberalism has been the dominant ideology in Western society since the early part of the twentieth century. This is not to say that it has prevailed everywhere. It has been challenged and on occasions defeated by communists, socialists, fascists and conservatives. Nevertheless, it has always returned as the central element

of political cultures in the West. Liberal *parties,* as such, may not have won elections or formed governments with any great regularity, but all mainstream parties in modern democracies have liberal values as part of their core identity. Conservative and social democratic parties, which tend to win most democratic elections, have come to accept many key liberal beliefs. It could be said, indeed, that liberalism has seeped into the social and political culture of all economically developed countries.

During the nineteenth century, liberalism did not enjoy such pre-eminence. Conservatives placed themselves in direct opposition to liberal values, seeing them as a threat to the preservation of order. Later, socialists associated liberalism with capitalism and so challenged it on the most fundamental grounds. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, liberalism began to transform itself into a **doctrine** which was far more wide ranging and able to answer the criticisms posed by both conservatives and socialists. To deal with conservative concerns about the creation of disorder by an individualistic society, liberals introduced the idea of social responsibility. In response to socialist claims that the philosophy entailed excessive inequality, liberals developed the principle of equality of opportunity. In this way, liberalism faced its challenges and absorbed criticisms. By the time the smoke of battle had cleared after the First World War, it was clear that the dominant values of liberalism would prevail in most economically developed, non-communist societies.

Key term

Doctrine

A doctrine is a strongly held single view or collection of connected views. It is less comprehensive than an ideology in that it does not encompass a complete vision of a desired society. The term suggests that those who hold doctrines adhere to them strongly and that their thoughts and actions are determined by them. For liberals, the desire for freedom in its various forms is a doctrine; for socialists, equality is a doctrine. Liberalism can be described as a doctrine in that it includes closely connected beliefs that all liberals believe in strongly.

The Enlightenment

The Enlightenment period, which roughly corresponds to the eighteenth century, may not have created liberalism, but it certainly made such a movement possible. The new philosophies of the period challenged existing assumptions about the nature of humankind and society, and made unprecedented assertions about the human condition. Among the most significant were the following:

- Each person is born a free, rational individual.
- An individual does not have to accept the judgement of rulers or the established churches to determine what is in his or her own best interest. Rather, each individual is the best judge of his or her own interests.

- An individual is not subject to forces beyond his or her control, including the will of God, but instead possesses free will.
- Society does not have a preordained order that consigns each person to a fixed status. Rather, every individual is free to find his or her own place in society.
- We are born fundamentally equal. Although we may have different powers and potential, we do inherit equal rights.

Today, we take such principles for granted. During the Enlightenment, however, these were truly revolutionary ideas that shook the Western world. A number of celebrated sources illustrate how dramatic these ideas were and how influential they proved to be. In 1689, at the dawn of the Enlightenment, the English philosopher John Locke (1632–1704) wrote in his *Two Treatises on Government*:

> The liberty of man in society is to be under no other legislative but that established by consent in the commonwealth, nor under the dominion of any will, or restraint of any law, but what the legislative shall enact, according to the true trust put in it.

Thus, in one statement, Locke dramatically rejects the idea of any form of government established without the expressed consent of the people.

Nearly a century later, the near-opening lines of Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826) in the 1776 American Declaration of Independence widened the debate. This statement established the rights of individuals and so, by implication, asserted the appropriate limits to government power:

> We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

The phrase 'the pursuit of happiness' implies that individuals are the only judge of what is best for them.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78) had already argued that humankind was being unjustifiably controlled by social and political restraints. In the introduction to his 1762 book, *The Social Contract*, he declared:

> Man is born free, but is everywhere in chains.

The 'chains' to which he refers were not merely the restraints imposed by absolute rulers, but any restraint upon the exercise of an individual's rights. He also implies that **natural rights** (e.g. to freedom) exist for all.

What the Enlightenment did, therefore, was to open people's minds to new possibilities. It enabled political movements to challenge the existing order and to establish forms of government which would free humankind, rather than enslave it. It made individuals into citizens with rights, rather than subjects with only obligations to obey. It also freed people's minds, enabling them to accept that it was possible to hold different beliefs without necessarily threatening public order and security.

Key term

Natural rights

This concept was developed by philosophers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It asserts that all individuals are born with rights that are granted by God or nature. The main natural rights specified are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. The theory of natural rights implies that such rights may not be removed or reduced except by the consent of the individual. The English philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) is often viewed as the first major theorist of natural rights, but the liberals who followed him (Hobbes was not a liberal), such as John Locke and Thomas Paine (1737–1809), are more closely associated with the concept.

Liberalism and capitalism

Just as liberalism was made *possible* by Enlightenment philosophy, so it became *necessary* in order to underpin the development of free-market **capitalism**. Towards the latter part of the eighteenth century, it was clear that a new economic order was emerging in the more developed parts of the world, mainly in western Europe. Fundamental economic changes were occurring as a result of the growth of international trade and the early stages of the industrial revolution. The old feudal order was crumbling and being replaced by a new system. This was spawning new social classes — independent farmers, free traders and merchants, industrialists and entrepreneurs, as well as workers who were free to seek employment by selling their labour to the highest bidder. The effect was the creation of a new dynamic economic structure, characterised by rapid growth and, above all, by freedom of the individual.

The most celebrated observer of the new capitalism was a Scottish economist, Adam Smith (1723–90). Smith's great work, *The Wealth of Nations*, was, by an interesting coincidence, published in the same year as the American Declaration of Independence — 1776. In it, he described how the new economic order was inhabited by individuals with free will, who would pursue their own self-interest as they saw fit. Far from resulting in chaos, the new free economy was forming a cohesiveness and a fresh order of its own. Through what he called the 'hidden hand', the development of free trade and unregulated business would act in the best interests of all. In essence, the 'hidden hand' would regulate the economy. Governments, he asserted, should be restricted to ensuring that all obey the law, and should steer clear of economic management.

Smith and the other advocates of free-market capitalism, such as David Ricardo (1772–1823), saw how vital it had become for individuals to consider themselves to be free, both in their pursuit of self-interest and from over-regulation by governments. The success of new free economies in creating wealth was a testament to how desirable such economic liberalism had become. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, however, liberalism was unable to dominate completely. The forces of conservatism and the interests of the traditional landed gentry opposed it ferociously. As the century wore

on, conservatism lost its battle with economic liberalism, but a new adversary emerged to take its place. This was early socialism and later radical Marxism.

Key term

Capitalism

Capitalism is the name given to the economic system that emerged in Europe and spread to the developed world during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It describes a system in which entrepreneurs take risks in organising production and extract a profit in return for the risks they take and for their organisational efforts. Under capitalism, goods, labour and finance are all exchanged between capitalists and consumers at values determined by free-market forces. Capitalism, liberals argue, requires a high degree of economic freedom for workers, consumers, financiers and entrepreneurs in order to operate effectively. Most of its aspects are criticised by socialists and anarchists. A more complete description is contained in the chapter on Marxism.

The development of the concept of liberty

The rationalism of the Enlightenment and the emergence of market capitalism both proved fertile ground for the growth of liberal ideas. One further element was needed in order for such ideas to become a complete philosophy. This was the concept of liberty. The way in which liberty (or freedom — the two terms are used here interchangeably) has been used by liberals is described in some detail below, but the term also has an important role in the development of liberalism itself.

Peter Newark's Historical pictures

French revolutionaries storm the Bastille in Paris, 1789

The two great events of early liberal history were the American (1775 onwards) and French (1789) revolutions. In both cases, the revolutionaries were inspired by a desire for freedom. The Americans sought refuge from the increasingly autocratic rule of the British Crown, while the French overturned the *ancien régime* in the hope of gaining freedom from undemocratic institutions. Most of us are familiar with the great battle cry of the French Revolution, 'Liberté, égalité, fraternité', which placed freedom as its first goal, as well as with the early words of the American Declaration of Independence (see p. 3). However, despite this, the freedom being promoted here was not quite what we would understand by the term today.

Events in America and France were based on what might be called 'revolutionary liberalism', which used the term freedom to mean escape from existing political authority and the establishment of a new government, a government by consent. The revolutionaries were, in fact, less concerned with individual liberty than with the freedom of the whole people — their freedom from oppression and arbitrary rule. The newly emerging societies of the 1770s and 1780s were not quite ready to deal with widespread individual freedom.

Freedom of the individual was a concept which was developed throughout the nineteenth century. It was the product of a new philosophy, often described as *classical liberalism.* As we have seen above, it became a necessary companion to the growth of free-market capitalism, but the idea of freedom of the individual was pre-eminent in liberalism for a relatively short time. It was not long before the dangers of excessive amounts of individual liberty were recognised and had to be confronted by liberals.

There were two main responses. First, liberals came to accept that freedom should not be exercised to the detriment of others in society, and that therefore the concept had to be combined with a sense of social responsibility. This can be described as a kind of social freedom, whereby individual liberty is exercised only in a socially responsible way. Second, liberals began to accept that there were two kinds of freedom — now commonly called *negative* and *positive* liberty. These are described fully below; it is sufficient to note here that negative liberty refers to the freedom of the individual from external restraints, while positive liberty refers to maximising the individual's choices and opportunities.

By the twentieth century, liberals had moved some distance from their early support for a more general concept of liberty. There had to be a balance between the rights of individuals in society, freedom should be exercised with a sense of social responsibility and governments needed to promote both positive and negative liberty. The idea of liberty had indeed come a long way from its first practical applications in France and America.

Core values of liberalism

Liberty/freedom

This is the central value for all liberals and therefore worthy of lengthy consideration. There are various different conceptions of liberty, all of which have been used by liberals at different times and in different circumstances. It bears repeating that, in this context, the terms liberty and freedom have essentially the same meaning. We can usefully divide the examination of liberty into three parts, as outlined below.

Political or revolutionary liberty

When the Scottish rebel William Wallace (1272–1305) cried the single word 'Freedom!' before his death on the scaffold in 1305 (at least according to Mel Gibson's film portrayal

of the character), he did not mean that the Scottish peasantry should become free from the government and laws of Scotland at the time, or free from the duties that they owed to their landlords. What his futile plea meant was that Scotland as a whole should be free from English domination. Wallace's use of the term expresses its principal meaning over the next 500 years. The only other context in which the term was used in this period was in circumstances where serfs, who were tied to the land and their feudal duties, or in some countries were even slaves, were granted their freedom. This did not imply that they should be 'free' as we understand the word today, but that they be released from their specific feudal or slave duties. They could then become wage earners or independent tradesmen.

As we have seen above, the freedom that the French and American revolutionaries sought was similar to Wallace's idea. For most of the early liberals, political freedom implied the freedom of a people to determine their own form of government and not to be ruled by any external power. This kind of freedom is also often known as *self-determination*. Throughout the nineteenth century, the word became the rallying cry of many independence movements throughout the Austro-Hungarian, Russian and Ottoman empires, as well as among German and Italian nationalist movements.

Although this particular meaning of freedom is no longer central to liberal thought, it remains true that one of the core values of liberal philosophy is that all peoples should be independent, should determine their own form of government and should be masters of their own national destiny.

Individual liberty

The transfer of emphasis among liberals from political to individual liberty occurred in the early part of the nineteenth century. Writing in 1820, French liberal Benjamin Constant (1767–1830) expressed the transition thus:

> The aim of the ancients was the sharing of social power among the citizens of the same fatherland; that is what they called liberty. The aim of the moderns is the enjoyment of security in private pleasures; and they call liberty the guarantees accorded by institutions to these pleasures...Individual liberty is, I repeat, the true modern liberty. Political liberty is its guarantee.
>
> From *Political Writings*, 1815

Before such thinkers as Constant, individual liberty, as a goal, had been the preserve of those philosophers who were considered to be exceptionally radical, for example Rousseau and the English anarchist William Godwin (1756–1836). From Constant's time onwards, however, it became clear to liberal thinkers that it was a practical aspiration.

The main enemies of liberty, in the view of early liberals, were over-powerful governments. Two main charges were laid against them. The first was that governments were too paternalistic, claiming to understand what was in people's best interests better than the people themselves. The second charge was that governments regulated the behaviour of individuals without just cause, in particular controlling their actions, even

though those actions did not affect anybody else or threaten society. This effectively divides the idea of individual liberty into two categories.

First, the *utilitarian* tradition of liberalism held, as its fundamental belief, that each individual is the best judge of his or her own interests. For the celebrated English utilitarian Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832), the concept of freedom was relatively simple. As individuals, we are motivated to pursue pleasure and to avoid pain. In other words, we know what we wish to pursue and what we wish to avoid. For Bentham, being allowed to make those decisions for ourselves and to act on them was the essence of freedom. He argued that the role of government should not be to make those decisions for us, nor should government prevent us from following our own self-interest, unless, of course, in so doing we prevent others from pursuing theirs. Hence, the *enlightened pursuit of self-interest* became a central liberal idea and, of course, one which coexisted well with free-market capitalism.

Second, in England, a follower of Bentham, John Stuart Mill (1806–73), developed a view of 'true' freedom based on the absence of constraint — perhaps this is how most of us tend to perceive the concept. Mill divided our actions into two types. The first were *self-regarding actions,* i.e. those that do not affect other people. In Mill's day such actions would have been mainly those of religious observance and the development of beliefs and personal morality. In a modern context, they might include recreational drug use, smoking, drinking alcohol etc. The second type was *other-regarding actions* that do affect others adversely, such as assault or theft, but also negligent behaviour, cruelty and discrimination.

Mill's explanation of this principle of true freedom has become a motto which all liberals can follow:

> The sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection. That is the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over a member of a civilised society, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant. He cannot rightfully be compelled to do or forbear because it will be better for him to do so, because it will make him happier, because, in the opinion of others, to do so would be wise or even right.
>
> From *On Liberty*, 1859

This famous passage encompasses both Bentham's idea of self-interested freedom and the classical view of liberty as the absence of unwarranted constraints.

Negative and positive liberty

The term 'negative liberty' was not used by Mill himself; the modern philosopher Isaiah Berlin (1909–97) coined the term a century later to describe Mill's view. By 'negative' he did not imply any criticism of the idea but rather that it referred to an absence of restraint. Berlin was concerned to differentiate between negative freedom and another kind of liberty which had been developed by liberals later in the nineteenth century (see Box 1.1).

Box 1.1 Differences between negative and positive liberty

Two short passages reveal the differences between negative and positive liberty, as described by Isaiah Berlin:

> Liberty in this [negative] sense is simply the area within which a man can act unobstructed by others. If I am prevented by others from doing what I could otherwise do, I am to that degree unfree.
>
> The positive sense of the word liberty derives from the wish on the part of the individual to be his own master. I wish my life and decisions to depend on myself, not on external forces of whatever kind. I wish to be the instrument of my own, not of other men's acts of will. I wish to be a subject not an object.
>
> Both from *Two Concepts of Liberty*, 1969

We can trace the concept of positive liberty back to the English moral philosopher, T. H. Green (1836–82). Like Mill, Green did not use the term 'positive liberty', but his meaning was close to Berlin's definition. He rejected the classical liberal view of Mill and others that society is made up only of self-interested individuals. Instead, he saw society as 'organic' and its citizens as interdependent as well as independent. In other words, citizens are not merely motivated by self-interest but also by a desire to promote the common good.

It follows from this that individuals achieve self-fulfilment not merely through pursuing their own happiness, but by pursuing social goods such as the welfare of others. Green's freedom is positive in that we can achieve personal satisfaction by doing good for others as well as for ourselves.

A more modern conception of positive liberty is that there should be the widest possible degree of choice and opportunity for everybody. We can synthesise this with Green's view in that, given freedom and choice, we will exercise a sense of social responsibility by pursuing the common good. This does not make Green a socialist. He still believed that the state should promote individual liberty and that we pursue self-interest, but he asserted that freedom is not one-dimensional: it is both individual and social in nature.

Green's divergence from the traditional, classical liberal view of freedom opened the door for liberalism to expand its political horizons beyond individual freedom. His philosophy ushered in a new liberal age which was able to embrace equality of opportunity, state welfare provision and even redistribution of income from rich to poor.

Tolerance

The liberal love of tolerance flows directly from Mill's principles of individual liberty, but it predates him in liberal thought by over a century in the ideas of John Locke. Locke was almost exclusively concerned with religious tolerance, an idea that was relatively radical at the time he was writing. He drew his conclusions from one simple principle: 'That every man may enjoy the same rights that are granted to others.'

Political controversy over religious tolerance raged throughout the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth century. With the arrival of liberals such as Mill, however, the tolerance debate transcended religion and involved every sphere of life. It was in the field of freedom of expression that liberalism campaigned most strongly in the nineteenth century. Toleration of other people's beliefs, values, thoughts and faiths, and their right to express them openly, became one of liberalism's most cherished goals.

In the twentieth century, attention switched to public attitudes towards minority groups. In recent times, liberals have defended and campaigned for the rights of minorities such as gays and ethnic and religious groups and have opposed all forms of censorship in the media and the arts.

A well-known liberal expression, dating back to the French philosopher Voltaire (1694–1778), is: 'I detest what you say, but I shall defend to the death your right to say it.' To this, Mill added that to prevent the expression of different beliefs and faiths was an exercise in arrogance. How are we to know, he asked, that our views are correct and those of others are wrong? This principle, nevertheless, needs some qualification.

Liberals will tolerate different beliefs and views but assign limits to this tolerance. If the security of the state or the freedom of individuals is threatened, or if people are being incited to commit crimes, act in a violent way or discriminate against any group, freedom of expression should be curtailed. This brings us back to Mill's view of freedom. We should be free as long as our actions are self-regarding and do no harm to others. Words or actions that adversely affect others should not be tolerated.

John Stuart Mill, who saw freedom in terms of the absence of constraints

Two further modern aspects of liberal tolerance should be considered. First, a typical liberal is sympathetic to the idea that individuals are influenced by their social and economic circumstances. In other words, we are not always responsible for our own actions. It follows that those who become involved in what is considered anti-social behaviour — notably crime, substance abuse and addiction or personal neglect — may do so as a consequence of social circumstances beyond their control. Thus, a liberal tends to be tolerant in his or her outlook and

proposes measures to assist individuals in the reform of their behaviour, rather than merely punishing them.

Second, modern liberals have tended to demonstrate greater tolerance than most people over personal morality. On issues such as sexual mores, abortion, homosexuality, same-sex marriage and the like, liberals generally take the view that these are private matters, not the concern of the state or of others in society. Indeed, it is in this area that the divisions between modern conservatism and liberalism are most sharply drawn. Conservatives insist that there is no such thing as entirely private morality; immoral behaviour does threaten the fabric of society and so should be controlled.

Equal rights

Liberals disagree among themselves about the existence of natural rights. Locke and Paine certainly based their whole belief systems around their existence. Bentham and Mill, on the other hand, rejected natural rights theory. For them, freedom consisted of the natural inclination of humankind to pursue its own selfish interests. However, this disagreement disguises a principle held universally by all liberals — that we are all entitled to equal rights.

Those liberals who support the idea of natural rights have no difficulty in translating this into support for equal rights. After all, if we all enjoy rights granted to us by God or nature, it must be true that they are given on an equal basis. Other liberals adopt a purely rational position. They can see no reason for inequality. For them it is unnatural, the creation of men in history who have sought to exercise power over others. For a liberal, we are all created equal and so must enjoy equal rights.

However, we must be careful here. A belief in equal rights is not the same as a belief in equality in general. Most (though not all) liberals accept that we have different abilities and potentialities when we are born. What they seek is the equal right to reach our full potential and to seek self-fulfilment.

These positions lead to two further conclusions. First, all distinct groups in society are entitled to the same rights. In other words, discrimination against groups should be outlawed. This has led liberals to advance the causes of full rights for women, gays, the disabled and ethnic minorities. Second, we are all entitled to **equality of opportunity**. This second issue is explored below.

Equality of opportunity

The classical liberals of the nineteenth century proposed a society in which individuals were largely free from restraint and therefore free to succeed or fail, to grow rich or to remain poor, to choose their own occupation and lifestyle and to find their own road to self-fulfilment. However, this philosophy began to present problems for many liberals as the century wore on. It became clear that the doctrines of equal rights and individual liberty were conflicting with each other. Many members of society, through unfortunate circumstances of birth and through no fault of their own, were not blessed with equal

opportunity to benefit from such a free society. Early social researchers, such as Charles Booth (1840–1916), revealed to a surprised world that there was such a thing as a cycle of deprivation, that poor families produced poor offspring and that there was little or nothing that could break this cycle.

John Stuart Mill himself, the great champion of individual liberty, late in his life came to accept this as a problem with his own philosophy. At the same time, the newly formed Liberal Party of Great Britain, led by William Gladstone (1809–98), espoused greater equality of opportunity as one of its goals. Thus, elementary education for all was introduced and entry into the professions — law, government and the army, for example — was opened to a wider spectrum of society. These were small advances in equality of opportunity but they indicated how liberal opinion was changing. The next great advance was promoted by William Beveridge (1879–1963), the creator of the welfare state. Beveridge proposed that the availability of welfare for all, notably education, healthcare and social security, would expand opportunity for all, no matter what their circumstances of birth.

After Beveridge, the cause of equality of opportunity was largely taken up in Britain by the Labour Party. From the 1960s, the introduction of comprehensive education and the expansion of higher education were the principal measures adopted, with the outlawing of discrimination against women, ethnic minorities and the disabled coming close behind. Indeed, at this time, the idea of equality of opportunity became part of the British political consensus, with all three main parties supporting, or claiming to support, the principle.

Key term

Equality of opportunity

This emerged as a political principle in the latter part of the nineteenth century. It recognises that some individuals are born with disadvantages which cannot be overcome by their own efforts. It is also a moral principle that suggests that all are entitled to equal life chances. Inequality can be justified, argue liberals and conservatives, provided all begin life with equal opportunities. Equality of opportunity is mainly promoted through universal education, but also implies the removal of artificial obstacles and other social problems which could hold some individuals back. In modern politics, all mainstream politicians and theorists accept it as a necessary feature of society, although liberals and socialists stress it most. It applies to class differences, gender issues and ethnic diversity.

So far we have concentrated on British liberalism, but the discussion would not be complete without reference to the US experience. In many ways the USA can be seen as the natural home of equality of opportunity and, indeed, some might say the whole of its society is based upon it. Education in the USA has long been supplied on a comprehensive basis and there are strong safeguards against discrimination both in the constitution and in the laws. The belief that every individual should have the opportunity to

advance in life has become part of the so-called 'American Dream'. Indeed, as in the UK, it has become so much a part of the country's culture that it is no longer associated specifically with liberalism. This should not, however, disguise the fact that it emerged very clearly from the liberal tradition of which Thomas Jefferson, James Madison (1751–1836) and Alexander Hamilton (1755–1804) were founding members.

Pluralism

The term 'pluralism' relates to a modern conception of the truly liberal society. Indeed, the French philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville (1805–59) regarded pluralism as an essential requirement for true democracy. For Tocqueville, pluralism was characterised by a flourishing collection of groups to which people owed allegiance and in which they could freely participate. Such a healthy **civil society** would prevent the state from becoming too powerful. It would also act as a balance against the potential tyranny of rule by the numerical majority.

Tocqueville's vision of pluralism was based upon his observations of the USA in the 1830s, but it was not until the twentieth century that liberals in Europe became concerned with the positive potentialities of pluralist democracy and society in general. The modern conception of pluralism includes a number of aspects:

- The diversity of cultures, religions, ethnic groups and lifestyles in society are tolerated and the rights of such groups protected.
- The state tolerates the expression of a variety of beliefs, philosophies and political creeds, provided they do not threaten the peace and security of the country.
- People are used to participating freely in such groups.
- Groups have access to the political system and therefore the opportunity to influence policy-making.
- The existence of different cultures, values and belief systems helps to prevent domination of society by any single section of society.

In summary, for liberals a pluralist society enhances freedom, spreads opportunity widely and helps to control the power of the state.

Key term

Civil society

This expression refers to the wide variety of groups that flourish in pluralist societies. Individuals may be part of such groups naturally, or may choose to join them in order to achieve certain personal goals or aspirations. Families are included as part of civil society, but the term generally refers to such groups as political parties, pressure groups, religious organisations, voluntary groups and charities, trade unions and media organisations. A free and active civil society is now seen as vital to a healthy democracy. It ensures that people become actively involved in society; it can also help to act as a counterbalance to the power of the state.