

FREEDOM AND DEMOCRACY

Introduction

We need a historical perspective to understand why the words “freedom” and “democracy” are often used together, even though we have little understanding of what freedom means today.

Before democracies were created to protect our freedoms, countries were ruled by a political elite and there was little freedom for most citizens. This elite could be led by a monarch, a bishop, the landed gentry or a general. It mattered little who was in charge, as all of them were authoritarians who controlled the life of most citizens.

Understandably, these authoritarian elites did not give up their power without a fight. To achieve their freedom, citizens had to go to war with the elite and many lives were lost on both sides. On winning that battle for freedom, a mechanism to retain and protect their freedoms was needed – and this was democracy.

Democracy was a new concept that had to be understood before a change could be made to replace the elite. So, the primary role of democracy from the beginning was to protect the freedom of the citizens, and to prevent any political elite from rising and taking freedoms away from the people again.

In the hundreds of years since then, our freedoms and its protector – democracy – has been threatened and many wars have been fought to protect our freedoms and the democratic form of government. Once again, many lives were lost.

Freedom

The citizens wanted to be left alone so they could get on with their life without any “authoritative interference”. This term extensively used 150 years ago, is rarely used today but it accurately described what the citizens wanted to avoid. The citizens did not want any form of authority interfering in their life.

However, it was obvious that some freedoms were to be lost. Perfect freedom was not the aim. For example, the freedom to kill, assault, steal, or rape would be lost.

Consequently, in the not too distant past, there was an ongoing debate on the best way to maximise freedoms and reduce “authoritative interference” to a minimum. Such discussions are rarely held today and as a result, Western citizens are losing a significant amount of their freedoms each year – as we drift towards an authoritarian state again.

This failure to protect our freedoms is caused by a lack of understanding of freedom itself. So most, but not all, of the loss is caused by our own ignorance.

What is Freedom?

The best way to understand freedom is to consider what it takes to remove a freedom from us.

If we were to remove the freedom of Canberra citizens to leave the capital city, how would we go about it?

First, we would have to tell all citizens they could not leave town. Because some might not hear about this new rule or some might deliberately want to ignore it, we need two other mechanisms. We would need enforcers at the airport, railway station and on all the roads leaving Canberra stopping people from leaving.

Because some might object to losing their freedom of movement, the enforcers should be given the authority to physically stop people from leaving and punish those who attempt to do so.

A street gang who want to stop people from entering their 'turf' will use the same three mechanisms. The gang will tell you, as you try to walk down the street, to turn around and walk back. If you persist the gang becomes the enforcers and will physically stop you. If you resist further, then they will punish those who continue to break their "law" by 'beating them up'.

"Political Correctness" removes our freedom to behave in a way that we want to. We will be told how we should behave. If we don't, the enforcement and punishment will be verbal attacks, humiliation and ostracising those who break the PC 'laws'. Once again, all three mechanisms are used.

If a government is removing a freedom, we would expect to see a law promulgated (e.g. Legislation and regulations published). The enforcers would be the police, and the courts would be used to punish those who broke the law.

Losing our Freedoms

Being vigilant about losing our freedoms, needs us to understand, debate and agree about the minimum "authoritative interference" that we will accept in our society. It doesn't matter particularly where that agreed line is drawn, but we all should know where that line is.

Without knowing where the line is, our freedoms can be frittered away over decades and we will remain ignorant about the losses. This is where we are today.

Most people support the idea of being free, and living in a free country but, in doing so, are using the label “Freedom” to receive a warm fuzzy feeling without understanding what freedom is, and how freedoms are lost. So, it is not surprising that we are losing so many freedoms with little discussion about this loss. We need to look behind the warm fuzzy label and better understand how our freedoms are being lost.

An Example of Progressively Losing Freedoms

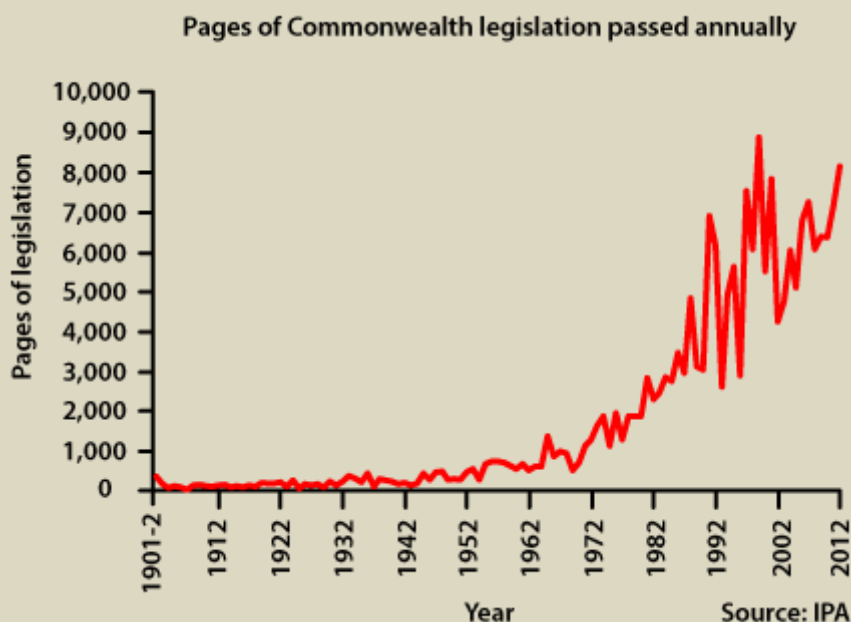
Laws passed by all three levels of governments in Australia will generally remove a freedom from a person, a group of people, or all citizens. This example only looks at Federal legislation.

It should be remembered that legislation generally has more detail of the law recorded in Regulations. Regulations are also laws, with approximately five pages of Regulation for each page of Legislation.

Legislation describes how individuals or organisations must behave and details the range of punishments that can be applied to those who break the law.

If we now agree that legislation removes freedoms, then the graph below should be of interest. From 1900 – 1970, the number of pages of legislation passed remained below a thousand pages a year. From 1970 - 2012 the number of pages of legislation rose rapidly and is now approximately eight times more than the legislation passed each year in the first seventy years of Federation.

You would have to wonder what changed in 1970 that required such a large increase in our freedoms being lost through “authoritative interference”. Also, is there any mechanism that protects us from losing our freedoms at this exponential rate?



Our Lack of Interest in Freedoms

On this website it is stated that being irrational is easy because it is a default position for most humans. To become rational takes work. Similarly, far too many people in our society want to be authoritarians and tell others what to think, what to say or what to do. So, to stop authoritarians removing our freedoms, also takes work.

If we lose interest in pushing back and protecting our freedoms, we are bound to lose them. Each time an authoritarian gets his way he is empowered to go further. If we are 'asleep at the wheel' while this goes on, we are likely to arrive at a situation where we are on the back foot and will have to fight to regain our freedoms. The worst case would be a civil war that has us forcing the authoritarians to stop taking away our freedoms.

"Academic" you might say. "It will never happen."

Recently President Erdogan of Turkey was asked his opinion about Democracy which was seventy years old in that country. He replied "Democracy should be used like a train. You use it to get where you are going and then you abandon it." So here was a President of a democracy planning to set up a theocracy with an authoritative elite removing freedoms from all Turks.

Imagine that was in Australia. What would you have to do to keep your freedoms – as once they are lost, they would never be returned by a non-democratic government? When would you start questioning, resisting, and eventually fighting for your freedoms? Or would you 'roll over' and become a modern-day serf.

Think about that.

Protecting Our Freedoms

In Australia today, we are 'asleep at the wheel' when it comes to freedom. We don't understand it and we don't realise we are losing freedoms. We haven't even considered what freedoms we are willing to lose and are horrified at the thought we might have to fight to retain our freedoms. Even our politicians are asleep.

In an interview about productivity in Australia, at least three politicians seeking praise have pointed at the amount of legislation they have passed. They were oblivious to the irony of seeking praise for removing our freedoms at an accelerated rate in a democracy.

Most when confronted with this topic are not disturbed and will even try and rationalise that the loss of freedoms is a good thing. Even regurgitating the banner used by all authoritarians – "It is for the common good".

Many will say “I like that law” without realising that they can live that way without a law. More importantly, those who do not like what you like, are not forced to adopt something that you like. In a free country no one will stop you. However, the freedom line is crossed when the law force others to obey who do not like the law – they have just lost a freedom.

We need to think a little deeper on this topic. It can get ugly when “the worms turn”! And that violence will always surprise those who are asleep.

In the past six months (2020) in America there have been authoritarian mobs shutting down cities across America. Stores are being looted, burnt down, and the owners killed. Police who try to stop these mobs are being attacked, injured, or killed.

Why is this happening? Because the mob wants to force their views on every American. In other words, take some of their freedoms away. Normally our political leaders would lead the pushback against this by condemning such behaviour.

However, 95% of Democrat politicians and 40% of Republican politicians refused to condemn this violence and anarchy. Why? They were playing the “Political Game” to avoid losing votes, while turning a blind eye to actions which hurt the nation and didn’t protect the freedoms of its citizens.

Once citizens realise their leaders are not leading, they face two options. Be subjugated and lose their freedoms or fight back. Now you have mobs fighting mobs and eventually, at the national level, a civil war. Or you avoid the violence and give up your freedoms and the democracy that was meant to protect your freedoms. You have now undone hundreds of years of work and will live under an authoritarian elite for the rest of your life.

This is a simplistic view of the extreme but one that should encourage us all to spend time thinking about our freedoms. It is more likely that our freedoms will be slowly but progressively lost while we ‘sleep’, and the need for violence to keep us in check will only occur occasionally. However, the result is the same.

Conclusion

Hundreds of years ago, citizens fought to be free to live their lives as they wished and not have it controlled by an authoritarian elite. Democracies were created to protect the freedoms of these citizens.

Today citizens have little understanding of freedoms and the primary role of democracies to protect those freedoms. Consequently, we are progressively losing our freedoms and encouraging authoritarians to control our lives.

We are 'asleep at the wheel' and do not recognise this and are unthinkingly being led down a path where, once again, we will be ruled by an authoritarian elite and we will become modern day serfs.