

HANDOUT:

Defining Liberalism

The word liberal has many meanings. It can describe everything from a generous spirit to questionable morals. The word's many uses can make it difficult to understand what people mean when they use the word liberal.

When liberal is used in a philosophical context, it is easier to define. Liberal is rooted in the Latin word *liber*, which means free. Being free is the basis of liberal philosophy.

Liberal philosophy flourished in the 17th century, when philosophers such as John Locke, John Stuart Mill, and Adam Smith began to think of what it meant to be free. Work such as theirs led to the development of modern liberalism.

Liberalism generally includes two beliefs:

1. the value of science and reason for making objective decisions, and
2. individuals can maximise their potential if they are free from coercion.

In short, liberalism emphasizes reason and individual rights.

Canadians widely accept liberal values. In fact, every major Canadian political party falls under liberalism's philosophical umbrella, accepting the importance of reason and individual rights. Broadly speaking, the Liberal Party of Canada is just as committed to the values of liberalism as the Conservative Party, the Green Party, and the New Democratic Party.

To be sure, Canada's political parties have differences—differences that are sometimes profound—but no major Canadian political party is foundationally committed to overturning the liberal norms of reason and individual rights.

Considering Reason and Individual Rights: John Stuart Mill

John Stuart Mill has guided much of our modern thoughts on liberalism. His most famous book on the topic is *On Liberty*. Written in 1859, the values it outlines remain important to Canada today.



On Liberty and Reason

Mill believed in the importance of hearing out all viewpoints in order to make a decision:

He who knows only his own side of the case, knows little of that. His reasons may be good, and no one may have been able to refute them. But if he is equally unable to refute the reasons on the opposite side; if he does not so much as know what they are, he has no ground for preferring either opinion.

Mill went on to say that it is vital to hear counterarguments from the actual source:

Nor is it enough that he should hear the arguments of adversaries from his own teachers, presented as they state them, and accompanied by what they offer as refutations. [Instead] he must be able to hear them from persons who actually believe them.

In other words, Mill believed that you must hear out a person in their own words. Only then can you make a reasoned conclusion about their views.

On Liberty and Individual Rights

Mill believed in the importance of preserving an element of unrestrained individuality in people:

There should be different experiments of living; that free scope should be given to varieties of character, short of injury to others; and that the worth of different modes of life should be proved practically, when any one thinks fit to try them. It is desirable, in short, that in things which do not primarily concern others, individuality should assert itself.

In other words, Mill believed that if what you do does not harm others, you should be free to do it.

THINK

1. Classic liberalism asks that people use science and reason to make the most objective decisions possible. However, we are all limited in how much we can know, and how objective we can be.
 - a) How can you know you have enough information to make a decision?
 - b) How can you know that your information is reliable?
2. If a person only “hears the arguments of adversaries from his own teachers,” do they truly know the situation?
3. Are there times when another person’s viewpoint is so unreasonable, it does not warrant being heard out?
4. Why are empathy and human decency key to any system of decision-making?