

British liberals seek alliance with right in name of defending liberty

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Will Hutton was one of the most important speakers at the Convention on Modern Liberty conference in London on February 28, addressing the theme "Freedom and democracy after the market meltdown."

The Convention on Modern Liberty has the backing of several civil rights groups, as well as the *Guardian* newspaper. Hutton himself is the former editor-in-chief of the *Observer* and director of *Guardian* national newspapers and is now the leading light in The Work Foundation, which provides consultancy and research to business, government and charities.

His remarks exemplify the response to the worsening economic and political crisis of capitalism by a layer of the liberal intelligentsia represented at the convention—the forging of an alliance with the conservative right in a movement to defend the existing order, under the banner of preserving democracy from the threat of extremism.

Hutton painted a candid and accurate depiction of the scale of the economic crisis now gripping world capitalism. He described an ongoing collapse worse than any other in history, including the Great Depression in the Hungry Thirties, one made more serious in its implications because of the unprecedented degree of social polarization.

He began by describing an "astonishing economic background" that has seen Japan's industrial production fall by a third in the three months to January and that of the United States fall by almost a quarter. The same picture is repeated in Europe, with Britain's GDP predicted to have declined by 6 percent by summer 2009. This drop in the space of just 18 months is greater than that suffered in the four years between 1929 and 1933.

He concluded, "In many respects, I am beginning to

think that what is taking place internationally is graver than what took place in the early 1930s."

Hutton then asked, "What's the impact of all this going to be for liberty?"

Internationally he described a descent into beggar-thy-neighbour protectionist measures, particularly in Europe where, "There's a real sense of 'sauve qui peut' [every man for himself] at the moment."

Regarding the domestic implications of the economic crisis, Hutton gives vivid expression to the fears this generates within Britain's ruling elite. He knows that the acute social tensions produced by the crisis of the profit system will in turn result in an eruption of the class struggle and a political polarization between left and right.

"Everyone knows the story of the 1930s," he said. "When unemployment climbs as precipitately as it does and when the safety net is as weak as it is, people blame the other."

This danger was particularly acute, given the destruction of welfare measures over the past quarter century. Britain would see a rise in unemployment of up to two million in the immediate period, Hutton suggested. In the 1980s under Thatcher, with over three million out of work and social unrest that culminated in a year-long miners' strike, the unemployed had to live on benefits equivalent to two-fifths of average earnings. Today, Jobseekers Allowance is set at £60.50, equivalent to just one-fifth of the average annual wage of £25,000.

"It's an absolute calamity," said Hutton. "There will be, I think, demands for vengeance."

Regarding the demand for "vengeance" he declares, "This could be a moment for the left or it could be a moment for the right." In either case this would be a threat to "not just economic liberties," many of which

he admits "got us into this mess in the first place, but actually political liberties. I think that there will be the rise of parties all over Europe which will be extremely unpleasant."

Hutton's reaction to the worsening crisis is that of extremely privileged layer which fears nothing more than a challenge to these privileges from below. Thus he makes the danger of fascism and socialism coeval; both being portrayed as different forms of "authoritarian statism" and threats to democracy.

Portraying himself as the defender of democracy from political extremism of all kinds, he calls for the reassertion of "the great Enlightenment traditions" and the restoration of the necessary "checks and balances" in economic and political life to prevent "a migration to a world of authoritarian statism on either the left or the right...more slump and even war."

In an earlier article in the *Guardian*, Hutton also declared baldly that the defence of liberty "isn't a question of left or right. We should fight together."

Despite such pretensions, in reality he and the layers represented by the convention are allying themselves with forces whose commitment to "Enlightenment values" is non-existent: the top leadership of the Conservative Party and the party's hardline Thatcherite wing, up to and including the union-busting Freedom Association, which has historic links to the far right.

Hutton justifies this alliance by claiming that a united struggle for liberty must not be prevented by disagreements over "the distribution of income, the role of markets." Rather the defence of liberty lies through the preservation of "a complex skein of institutions," including "government, an independent civil service, a free media, independent shareholders, free trade unions, independent universities, regular elections."

This turns reality on its head. It is precisely the polarization of wealth between an oligarchy of the super-rich at one pole and the majority of working people who face ever greater financial hardship at the other that has been the driving force for the constant erosion of civil liberties over the past decade and more. This unprecedented transfer of social wealth from the vast majority to a tiny minority has been accomplished through the destruction of living standards, the smashing up of welfare provisions and the return to the most predatory forms of imperialist militarism in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The Enlightenment traditions cited by Hutton were based on the equality of all citizens before the law, but this in turn rested on the belief by representatives of the bourgeoisie that private ownership of the means of production was the basis for individual liberty. In the struggle against feudalism, such a claim was indeed progressive. But today, centuries later, the institutions created by the bourgeoisie to administer its rule preside over the most economically unequal society in world history. Even formal democracy is no longer compatible with such a diseased social order. Consent cannot be won for policies that are detrimental to the interests of the vast majority. Coercion is required.

Today there can be no successful defence of democratic rights outside of a conscious pursuit of the class struggle against the capitalist profit system based on a socialist programme. It is not the working class seeking "vengeance" that poses a threat to democracy as embodied in the institutions of the state, the "free media," etc. It is the state, including parliament, the civil service and the judiciary, as well as a media controlled by big business, that is being used to curtail and destroy civil liberties and which, as instruments of bourgeois class rule, represent the greatest threat to democratic rights. It is against this danger that the working class must be mobilized.



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