
A tribute to Norman Barry (25 June 1944 – 21 October 2008)

Martin Ricketts

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It is my sad task today to address the congregation at the funeral of a great scholar, a close colleague and a staunch personal friend. I first met Norman when he took up his post at Buckingham in 1982 and for the next 25 years we shared the ups and downs of life here as well as many overlapping interests. It turned out that we had much in common and had a similar intellectual outlook, even though Norman's background was in politics and mine was in economics. Having read and studied Hayek, Norman had a grasp of economics that was very rare among political theorists, while as a student of Stanley Dennison, John Jewkes, Jack Wiseman and Alan Peacock, I had been schooled in political economy and public finance, and had been introduced to the history of economic thought. I would not like to calculate how many hours we must have sat in pubs, offices and seminar rooms discussing questions of common interest. To be able to spar with Norman over such an extended period with the utmost good humor was one of the most formative experiences of my life. It helped that we came from differing disciplines because it reduced our perception of personal rivalry to very manageable proportions. We questioned and tutored one another out of mutual interest. The education that he provided in political theory, constitutional law and social philosophy did not threaten him. My attempts to help with Austrian economics, public choice and the economics of social policy did not threaten me. It was a pure form of intellectual barter that strengthened us both. It must say something about us, however, that we did not write a single joint paper.

Norman graduated from the University of Exeter and arrived at Buckingham after stints at Queens Belfast (where he met the economist George Shackle) and Birmingham Polytechnic. He was immensely proud to be a member of the University of Buckingham. Of course, like all things that are important to us, it could occasionally be the object of criticism. Indeed we are more inclined to voice our disappointments over things we care about than over things that we can take or leave. But, for Norman, the University of Buckingham became a central feature in his life and career. It was not just a place where he happened to have a job. The University

gave him a freedom that he could not feel elsewhere. And he gave the University intellectual firepower in defense of its independence and even of its existence. In 1994 he wrote *The Case for Independent Universities*, a pamphlet that was used by the University during the National Committee of Enquiry into Higher Education in 1997 under the chairmanship of Sir Ron Dearing.

One has to remember that, in the 1970s, Norman's views were deeply unfashionable. Not only did he defend classical liberal social science, he was a political theorist who was interested in economics and who introduced economic analysis into his politics. He was one of the first political theorists in the UK to master 'public choice' theory – the so-called economics of politics. He admired the work of James Buchanan and Gordon Tullock in *The Calculus of Consent* and Anthony Downs's *Economic Theory of Democracy*. He was one of the first to consider the implications for political theory of the economic analysis of public goods. He had read Charles Tiebout's 1956 article 'A pure theory of local expenditures' [*Journal of Political Economy*, 64 (5), 416–24] and deduced the implications for the economic analysis of competitive federalism long before his professional colleagues, and this marked him as an unreliable outsider if not a defector to the enemy.

Escaping from an uncongenial consensus was important. But equally important was a psychological benefit from being at the University of Buckingham. As a critic of state power and more specifically of state finance of higher education, he could avoid all charges of hypocrisy by coming to Buckingham. Here he was paid by his students, just as Adam Smith would have approved. He could be at one with himself. Buckingham was his natural home.

On his arrival in Buckingham, Norman had already published *Hayek's Social and Economic Philosophy*, a work admired by Sir Alan Peacock who was then Vice-Chancellor. He had also produced a textbook – *An Introduction to Modern Political Theory* – that went to four editions. Norman particularly enjoyed meeting alumni of Oxford or Cambridge who admitted to him that his textbook was widely used and greatly appreciated for its clarity and coverage – even if (as Norman liked to believe) it had to be circulated in brown paper envelopes. In the following two decades, a stream of high-quality work came from his pen (and later his keyboard). His books on classical liberalism and libertarianism, welfare policy and business ethics were translated into Japanese, Chinese, Turkish, Italian and Swedish. He published papers in internationally respected journals including the *British Journal of Political Science*, the *Cornell Law Review* and the top-ranking journal in the United States, *Political Theory*. Here he engaged seriously with the top minds of the

time. In his 1984 article ‘Unanimity, agreement and liberalism’ [*Political Theory*, 12 (4), 579–96], he offered a powerful critique of the philosophical foundations used by the future Nobel Laureate James Buchanan in his approach to constitutional choice. His inaugural lecture at Buckingham contrasted the philosophical problems encountered by end-state theories of justice compared with theories of justice derived from rules of just conduct.

Norman produced over 150 publications on a wide-ranging set of issues. The pensions problem; marriage and divorce; Austrian economics; German neo-liberalism (he was an ardent admirer of Ludwig Erhard and the German Ordoliberals); essays on the history of political thought including the work of Edmund Burke, Hume, Smith, Rousseau and Bastiat; varieties of capitalism and issues of corporate governance; insider dealing; citizenship and rights; and constitutional law. He was happy to stoop to journalism – defending the financial innovator Michael Milken, the takeover raider T. Boone Pickens and Gordon Gekko from their detractors during the 1980s era of ‘greed is good’. Essentially he saw these figures as protectors of shareholders against the depredations of arrogant and unaccountable managers. As he put it when reviewing the more recent Enron, WorldCom and Tyco scandals in the *Financial Times*, ‘All the players of the 1990s were very hot on business ethics but they were much cooler on right and wrong’.

Although Norman was at home at Buckingham, his world was actually much wider and far-flung. From his lair he could foray out to wage a continual guerrilla campaign of disruption against the advance of collectivist thinking. His network ran through the Institute of Economic Affairs in London, where he was a member of the Advisory Council, through to contacts in think tanks and associations across the world. He was a regular visitor to the Philosophy Centre at Bowling Green, Ohio where he once stayed at the Buck-Eye Budget Motor Inn – a residence, he delighted in telling me, as impersonal as it was possible to imagine and therefore the nearest to his ideal of abstract market coordination. Yet this vaunted disdain for all communal ties was pure affectation, and the irony was transparent. I can attest to the affection in which he was held at the Philosophy Centre by the flow of emails that I have received enquiring after him. He regularly attended and occasionally arranged conferences organized by the Liberty Fund. I remember attending one in Bruges arranged with the expert administrative help of our own Anne Miller [i.e. of Buckingham]. He lectured in New Zealand, Australia, Japan, Italy and many other countries. And, of course, he was a regular visitor to the Association for Liberal Thinking in Turkey, a connection that has brought us recently a stream of welcome visitors to the Beloff Centre for

the Study of Liberty. As he himself would have put it – again heavy with irony – he was indeed ‘big’ in Turkey.

One of the great delights of Norman’s company was his ability to use humor for the serious purposes of communicating ideas. If he was joking, he was probably also trying to draw attention to a serious point. Indeed, to some degree, the more serious the point, the more likely he would be to joke about it. In this he was in a great English tradition. On the other hand he enjoyed pure flippancy. He liked the idea of persiflage – the lightest of banter – although, even here, he took his banter seriously. This derived from his libertarianism. As a clever man he relished pure wordplay and sharp wit. But I think he also actually enjoyed annoying his socialist opponents whom he rightly or wrongly took to be almost completely humorless. Why should all these pompous fools insist that we have to be serious all the time? He once recounted with great pleasure, for example, the story of Noel Coward’s riposte to the newspaper reporter who asked how, during the depression years of the 1930s he could enjoy his champagne breakfast – ‘Doesn’t everyone’?

But, as well as the short flippant observation or witty wordplay, Norman was capable of gradually constructing the most elaborate and whimsical flights of fancy. In the early days he managed to establish a surreal link between the competition within a group of us to produce the most academic papers in each calendar year and the Tour de France. A whole vocabulary developed of which the most important element concerned the metaphorical ‘yellow jersey’ supposedly worn by the race leader. This inevitably led to the invention of jerseys of more and more colors to represent more and more ridiculous (and provisional) achievements by his imaginary rivals. Like a game of Mornington Crescent, I might lay claim to being the wearer of the lime green jersey without necessarily having any idea what bizarre substage of the race this was supposed to signify – although Norman might always be expected to think of something. He was delighted when, in an early annual report, it was revealed that a member of the maintenance department had published an article in *Caravanning Weekly* (or some similarly titled magazine) and thereby had come higher in the publications race than many academic members of staff. Topsy-turvy figured, I think, significantly in Norman’s humor – a Gilbert and Sullivan element.

In terms of musical theatre, however, his taste was less Gilbert and Sullivan and more Rodgers and Hart. The sophistication of the lyric seemed to be the key to his taste. He was genuinely knowledgeable about the history of the American musical – perhaps part of his overall love affair with the United States. He disliked sentimentality and preferred the words of Larry Hart, Cole Porter and Stephen Sondheim to

Oscar Hammerstein. He could be somewhat pedantic – criticizing the use of the line ‘stamp me and mail me’ in the song ‘Get me to the church on time’ sung by Eliza Doolittle’s father in Lerner and Loewe’s *My Fair Lady* – on the grounds that a cockney would never have used the American ‘to mail’ as a verb but the English ‘to post’. Somehow ‘stamp me and post me’ did not work at all and required extensive re-writing of the rest of the song. I’m not sure whether he ever solved the problem to his satisfaction.

The plays of Tom Stoppard were another interest of Norman’s and he acted as the organizer of a Liberty Fund conference to discuss them. He naturally liked the fact that Stoppard was seen as a right-wing playwright in an age of ‘angry young men’, ‘kitchen sink’ drama, and social protest. The characters in Stoppard’s plays are often academics or other intellectuals facing ethical dilemmas. My *Oxford Companion to English Literature* says of the play *Jumpers*, for example, that ‘the physical acrobatics of the jumpers of the title parallel the verbal gymnastics of (the central character’s) lengthy speeches, which are brilliantly witty parodies of academic philosophy’. One can see immediately that this would appeal to Norman.

He reviewed theatrical performances and films and revealed in this journalistic output much about himself and his approach to politics. ‘When I first read the Diaries,’ he says in his review of *Bridget Jones*, ‘I thought – at last a female reactionary . . . who smokes Silk Cut and drinks too much Chardonnay. She must be a conservative . . . I had not felt so confident about the future since I read that the Spice Girls were Thatcherites’. Actually he goes on to conclude that Bridget is actually not interested in politics at all, but he is nevertheless determined to claim her and does so with the observation that it is precisely because she has no interest in politics that she is a real conservative.

Norman himself often claimed that he disliked politics – a seemingly paradoxical observation for a Professor of Politics. But there is no doubt that he hated practical politics. For Norman, nothing could disguise the basic truth that politics is the business of making collective choices and that, in practice, it mostly involves one lot of people bossing around another lot of people. Politics must in the end confer power to coerce and this was always repellent to him. He preferred agreement and the gains that accrue to non-coerced trade. Hence his emotional preference for the study of economics and his devotion to Hayek. He studied politics, he said, in the way that a biologist studies a lethal bacterium. If people like Bridget Jones who are indifferent to politics are conservative, it is difficult to see Norman in the same camp. In the end, Norman was a classical liberal, hating politics but deeply interested in social and political theory and continuing the search for ways of gaining the collective benefits from

a strong state whilst somehow imposing constitutional limits on its hydra-like tendency to grow.

It was in 1997 at a conference not far from Hamburg that I first became aware that Norman was finding it difficult to walk. I remember we made it to a suitable hostelry, ordered some beer, our talk turning to academic and other matters and, making light of the episode, he recovered fairly rapidly. Norman always made light of his condition. After he was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, and even as his condition worsened so that relatively simple tasks became increasingly difficult, I never heard a single word of self-pity. He would occasionally admit to a bad day but in the tones of scientific detachment – a simple observation of the facts. His determination to continue was formidable. Even in the last months, as he concentrated intently on the task of holding a cigarette between his fingers, and I nervously anticipated the hot ash dropping onto a newspaper, we talked of academic papers still to be written. As Norman's physical and mental faculties were eroded, an unquenchable will remained untouched – an absolute determination, like Ulysses in a once much-admired poem by Tennyson, to go on to the bitter end:

Come my friends,
'Tis not too late to seek a newer world.
Push off, and sitting well in order smite
The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds
To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths
Of all the western stars, until I die.

Those of us who remain should draw what courage we can muster from Norman's example. For, as the eponymous hero of Tennyson's poem says as he encourages his oarsmen to set out once more:

Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho'
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven; that which we are, we are;
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.