Liberalism- Topic 1:

A history of Liberalism-

* Word derives from Latin= class of free men, not slaves.
* The term arose as a reaction to the collapse of the traditional feudal system (a system of social hierarchies and the emergence of a market system (capitalism)) in the 19th century. This caused a middle class to emerge, which caused conflict with the established monarchs and aristocracy.
* The US and French Revolutions embodied liberal ideas.
* Liberalism challenged absolute rulers, as they advocated constitutional and representative government. They supported freedom of conscience.
* In some societies, like those with collective cultures, a grounds for the development of socialism occurred, rather than western liberalism.
* The radical/reforming nature of liberalism faded, as the rising middle classes succeeded in maintaining their dominance.
* As industrialisation progressed, liberals began to question their early ideas. They came to believe that the state was needed to play a more important role, through welfare services. This led to the development of two classifications of liberalism- Classical and Modern.
* The end of the 20th century was seen as a triumph of liberalism. Fukuyoma argued that it was the “End of society”- in that this was the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution.

Key themes of Liberalism-

* The individual-
* Main focus of liberalism is the individual as a primary political unit.
* As feudalism was replaced with capitalism, people had choices in their lives and were encouraged to think for themselves- as an individual.
* Philosophers began to examine life by looking at individuals and their ability to make choices. Political philosophers began to develop to adapt to these theories, such as the ideas of ‘Natural Rights’. (Kant- individuals are of equal dignity and worth. People are ‘ends in themselves’.)
* Differences in liberalism:

-Atomism: Individuals look after their own interests and therefore society does not exist. Society is merely a group of individuals looking to benefit themselves. (Thatcher- ‘No such thing as society’)

Macpherson characterised classical liberals as ‘possessive individualism’- they regard the individual as ‘the proprietor of his own person or capacities, owing nothing to society for them’.

-Optimistic: Where people think as individuals and as a result wish to look after each other and create a better world. This is more commonly linked with modern liberals.

* Freedom-
* If you believe in the individual, you must believe in individual freedoms. Individuals cannot exist if they don’t have rights.
* Freedom is important as it allows the individual the ability to make choices that were important for them to be able to live as they wish.
* Liberty should only be limited if an individual is going to limit another person’s liberties. This view is presented by J.S.Mill.
* Liberals agree on the value of liberty- however they do not always agree on the definition of ‘free’.
* Classical liberals argue that liberty is a natural right and an essential requirement for leading a truly human existence. This gives the individual the opportunity to pursue their own interests.
* Modern liberals argue that the only condition in which people are able to develop their skills, fulfilling their own potential is one of freedom.
* Isaiah Berlin developed the ‘Two concepts of Liberty’;

-Negitive Freedom; the absence of restrictions on an individual’s freedom to act (by bodies such as the state)

-Positive Freedom; Ability of individuals to decide what they can and cannot do, as they have been allowed to develop their potential. This may involve help from others such as the state.

* Reason-
* During the Enlightenment (period of time when people moved away from religion), ‘reason’ theorists began to believe that people were able to work out, in a logical fashion, what was in their best interests.
* It differs from ‘paternalism’, which is the idea that a father figure makes decisions for you. ‘Reason’ implies that people are able to logically make their own decisions.
* Reason links to liberalism and human nature as people can logically make their own decisions.
* Liberals generally view human history in terms of progress, literally in terms of moving forward. The expansion of knowledge, especially through scientific revolution, enables people to understand the world and shape it for the better.
* The debate of problems through reason and logic will lead to peaceful solutions, war is therefore a last resort. The use of force is merely a final resort, after reason and debate has been attempted.
* Education is also important as a means of self-development and achieving social advancement.
* There is, however, a risk of egoism taking over and leading to conflict or rivalry, thus meaning that liberals do not subscribe to the idea of human perfectibility.
* LINKING FREEDOM AND THE INDIVIDUAL….

The theme of the individual and freedom link as it is recognised that everyone is different, therefore making it necessary to grant people freedom to think and act how they wish.

* Justice:
* Moral judgements are made about a person’s actions and those actions are either punished or rewarded; social justice is about providing people with their ‘fair share’ to exist in society.
* Liberals believe in justice because they believe in different kinds of equality.
* Foundation equality is the belief that every human being is born equal- they therefore have some rights and moral worth. The believe in individualism supports this.
* Formal equality- no human should be give social status above others, for example within class systems. Liberalism is ‘difference blind’, in that everyone is treated the same, regardless of differing features. However, this in itself is self-defeating, as by treating everyone the same, this would have an unequal impact on different culture, thus neglecting its own purpose. Some are inevitably favoured.
* The most important type of equality is political or legal equality, in that the state must treat everyone the same.
* There should be equality in opportunity, in that meritocracy is promoted and everyone has the chance to achieve something.
* Differences in liberal thinking:
  + The state should leave people alone and let them achieve what they can from birth, regardless of their situation at birth.
  + The state should try to raise the less privileged to give them an equal opportunity to achieve the same as others.
* Social equality is not desirable due to individual differences- some individuals are willing to work much harder than others.
* Modern liberals suggest that some level of social equality is needed. Rawls argued that economic inequality is only justifiable if it works to benefit the poorest in society.
* Classical liberals endorse meritocracy on economic and moral grounds. They place a heavy emphasis on the need for incentives.
* Toleration:
* An acceptance of pluralism can said to be rooted in the principle of individualism and the assumption that humans are separate and unique creatures. The liberal preference for diversity has more commonly been associated with toleration.
* Toleration is the acceptance of differences.
* Volitare- ‘I detest what you say but I defend to the death your right to say it’. This supports the idea of tolerating someone who is different both ethnically and socially.
* Ethical and social justification for toleration:
* Ethics is an idea of a code of conduct that people should set themselves on how to behave around others.
* Social toleration is a rule by which people are expected to behave towards others by people in society.
* Toleration was adopted by liberals in the 16th century, when people such as Locke argued for religious toleration. Locke- the state has no right to ‘meddle with men’s souls’.
* Mill argues that toleration is necessary to ensure the health of society as a whole. In a free market of ideas, the ‘truth’ will emerge as good ideas will eventually replace bad ones and ignorance is progressively banished. Contest, debate and argument are therefore the motor of social progress.
* However, how do you fight for toleration if it means allowing people you cannot stand to have their way of life and point of view. EG-BNP has extreme non-tolerant views.
* Toleration promotes social harmony, especially if it promotes debate and education. Understanding another person’s ideas will allow people to work and live together more efficiently.

What is the liberal view of the state?

* Liberals have an uneasy relationship with the state. A state represents political authority and therefore challenges individual freedom.
* However, liberals agree with Hobbs (state of nature) and argue that total freedom is not genuine freedom, because self-interested individuals will limit the freedom of others. Locke-“Where there is no law, there is no freedom”
* The state should be limited, which allows the state to be a positive freedom provider rather than a negative ‘freedom encroacher’, thus meaning that it is a necessary evil.
* The state is ‘evil’ in the sense that individuals can no longer be free in society, as sovereignty is passed from the individual onto the state.
* Liberal social contract theory suggests that the state is created by people, for people. The state therefore should represent the people as a neutral arbiter, which will only intervene in the event of loss of freedom.
* The state comes from ‘below’- from the people. Therefore, if people feel that the state is not fulfilling its functions, it can be challenged or abolished by the people.
* Individuals are rational, but this may cause them to be selfish. Therefore, the only way of protecting individuals is through a sovereign state. Locke- ‘freedom can only exist under law, where there is no law, there is no freedom’.
* ‘Power tends to corrupt and absolute power tends to corrupt absolutely’- Lord Acton. People are naturally self-serving and operate on the basis of egoism- this means that if given a chance, they may limit the freedom of others in order to benefit themselves. A limited government is therefore necessary.
* Hobbes and Locke argue that complete freedom will lead to the state of nature, which in turn limits all freedom. The rational individual will therefore create a social contract, through forming a sovereign state.
* The social contract embodies two liberal attitudes towards the state and political authority:

1. Political authority comes ‘from below’. The state is created by individuals, for individuals. This implies that citizens do not have absolute obligation to accept government. When the legitimacy of a government disappears, the people have a right to rebellion.
2. Social contract theory portrays the state as an umpire or neutral referee in society. The state is a neutral arbiter, when individuals or groups come into conflict with each other in a society based upon competition.

Constitutional government:

* Constitutionalism is the practise of limited government, through the enforcement of constitutional rules, practised within government institutions and political processes. A constitution is a set of rules that seek to allocate duties, powers and functions between various institutions of government.
* In a broader respect, constitutionalism is a set of political values that reflect a desire to protect liberty through internal and external checks on government power. EG- codified constitution, a bill of rights, separation of powers, bicameralism and federalism.
* Liberals support constitutionalism, due to their fear of power. They believe that a constitution limits a potentially tyrannical state from limiting freedoms. This is due to their view that whilst humans are rational, they are self-serving also.
* Constitutionalism can be achieved in two ways:

1. The powers of government and politicians can be limited by external legal constraints. For example, through a written constitution, which places all powers and responsibilities of government institutions into one single document.
2. Introduction of internal constraints, which disperse political power among a number of institutions and create a network of ‘checks and balances’.

* All liberal political systems exhibit some level of internal fragmentation, which is achieved through using the doctrine of the separation of power, proposed by Montequieu;
* The legislative, executive and judicial powers of government should be exercised by three independent institutions thus preventing any individual or small group from gaining absolute power.
* Judicial independence must be respected in order for the principle to be upheld.

Liberal arguments for and against democracy:

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| **FOR** | **AGAINST** |
| **Democracy gives consent and therefore legitimacy to govern:** Liberals believe the state is a necessary evil, they argue that this legitimacy can only be gained through the consent of the people. This is gained through electoral democracy. Eg- Locke discussed power being ‘given’ to the people. | **Rule by the masses at the expense of wisdom- Plato:** Suggests that gov decisions need to be mad by the experts and that the mass population is not qualified to make these decisions. Uneducated popular democracy leads to bad government, which can limit individual freedom. |
| **Protection against the tyranny of government for people and property:** Liberals believe the state must be limited and restrained. Its ability to use power such as taxation must be limited through regular democracy. Eg- Jefferson: ‘No taxation without representation’. | **Lack of effective government because of unequal knowledge and abilities- Mill:** Some liberals argue that a everybody is unique, they have different talents and abilities. Not everybody is qualified or able to make state decisions. |
| **Only way to achieve utilitarianism:** Utilitarians believe that for most people to have the most freedom, majoritarian democracy is the only way to achieve it. | **Democracy rejects the concept of the individual in favour of the will of the group:** Democracy involves individuals voting, but through this, decision making is collective. This limits freedom in favour of collectivised decision making. |
| **Developmental democracy:** Mill believed that through people having a say, they would gain knowledge and experience and therefore gained more understanding and therefore choices. Through the democratic process, people gain more freedom. | **Democracy can lead to the ‘tyranny of the majority’- De Torqueville:** Democracy is naturally majoritarian. It leads to decisions being made by the largest group. This means that people who are different and in the minority may be ignored, leading to a loss of individual freedom. |
| **The only way of creating harmony in a modern society:** In a diverse society, there is never going to be a consensus, therefore people will not always get what they want. However, democracy makes people feel like they have been listened to, creating a more harmonious society. | **Democracy leads to bad/selfish and short term choices, which can allow authoritarian rulers to gain power- Gasset:** When people are given the vote, they vote for popularist and charismatic leaders, who appeal to people’s emotions. When these leaders are elected, they become authoritarian and limit civil liberties. Eg- Hitler was elected legally. |

Core theories of classical liberalism:

* Humans are rational and egotistical, meaning that they are naturally self-interested. Society is therefore atomistic, made up of separate individuals.
* They believe in negative freedom, which is the absence of external constraints or restrictions. (The unencumbered individual’- Mill)
* The state is a necessary evil (Paine). Necessary to protect freedoms and evil because it is a collective process and a restriction to liberty.
* They have a positive view of human nature. They believe that the state should be minimal to allow people freedom. These free choices will lead to a balance in society. Through this they believe in free market economics (capitalism).

**NATURAL RIGHTS:**

* Locke and Jefferson believe in the concept of naturally existing rights. These are entitlements that people have purely by being human. This are otherwise known as human rights.
* Two core natural rights;

-The right to life and the right to liberty or freedom.

* Natural rights theorists therefore believe in the minimal state, which is upheld by the principle of ‘social contract’.
* The minimal state should only have three core functions:

-Maintaining public order and protecting property

-Defence against external attack

-Ensure that contracts are enforced.

* “Government is best, which governs least”- Jefferson

**UTILITARIANISM:**

* Some classical liberals rejected the idea that rights were naturally forming, and instead developed the principle of utilitarianism.
* Bentham described natural rights as ‘nonsense on stilts’, arguing that they did not exist. Utilitarianism is a moral principle based on the promotion of happiness and the prevention of suffering, for the greatest number of people. They argue that this principle should guide liberal thinking. Policy is therefore guided on the principle of utility.
* This principle is adopted by liberals who believe in a minimal state. Only individuals can judge their own pleasure and pain, because they are individual and unique. Therefore, the state cannot make decisions for them.
* Utilitarians have been criticized by other liberals because their theories are seems as majoritarian, as they seem to sacrifice the needs of minority or individual, for the majority.

**ECONOMIC LIBERALISM:**

* Just as liberals believe in individual freedom, they believe in individual economic freedom. This is a rejection of internationalist (mercantilist) economic theory.
* Classical liberals believe that a free market, based on market forces (supply and demand) will benefit all. This means that all trade is a series of individual relationships and contracts. This can be for goods or services.
* Liberals believe that not only is this economic freedom desirable because people are rational and capable, but also that it will lead to general utility, in that competitive trade creates value and equality.
* Economic liberalism was developed by thinkers such as Adam Smith and he argued that through the liberal theory of human nature, free market capitalism was desirable. Not only could people make rational, self-interested choices, but also the market would self-regulate free from human greed or self-interest. Smith called the market forces that regulate an economy, “the invisible hand of capitalism”.
* A belief in classical liberal economics developed from the industrial revolution onwards. It became represented by no or little state intervention. This ‘lassiez-faire’ belief supported the idea that the unrestrained pursuit of profit would lead to general prosperity. These ideas were only challenged by the Great Depression of the 1930s.

**SOCIAL DARWINISM:**

* Classical liberals focus their belief on individualism in terms of a rejection of social welfare. They believe in natural meritocracy, that individuals should be judged, succeed or fail based on their willingness to work and talents. This was expressed by Smiles’ book ‘self help’- “Heaven will only help those who help themselves”.
* The liberal belief in laissez-faire ideas suggests that individuals should be self-relient and if they wish to change their circumstances, they must do it themselves.
* Spencer explained these ideas in relation to Darwin’s theory of evolution- ‘the survival of the fittest’. This was applied to society by both Spencer and Sumner as an argument against social welfare. “The drunk in the gutter is just where he ought to be”.

**NEO-LIBERALISM:**

* From the 1970s onwards, liberals began to challenge increased state intervention and argue for a reinvention of classical liberal economics. This was based on economic ‘stagflation’, which seemed to support a need for change in economic theory. These ideas were most strongly supported in the US and the UK, and became known as ‘Reaganism’ and ‘Thatcherism’.
* Neo-liberal economics became part of New Right theory and is based on ‘market fundamentalism’ (extreme support for the free market). This is a believe that the state should have minimal involvement in the economy. Thinkers such as Friedrich and Hayek strongly attacked state planning and intervention in economics.
* Neo-liberals challenge post-war Keynesian economics, arguing that a state could not efficiently manage an economy, as it is too complex. Key neo-liberal policies were privatisation, low government spending and low taxation.
* Neo-liberals support the free market for several key reasons:

-The market is thought to be self-regulating and more efficient.

-Markets lead to prosperity because they are run by the profit motive.

-Through supply and demand, markets channel resources to where they need to be.

Core theories of modern liberalism:

* During the industrial revolution of the 19th century, as well as the great depression of the 20th century, some liberals began to re-examine the nature of individualism and the role of the state.
* Industrialization led to inequalities and poverty for many, which led to many liberals calling for a change in ideas with regards to state intervention. Freedom would be enhanced enabling people.
* Classical liberals argue that modern liberals have abandoned liberal principles by using the ‘collective state’. Modern liberals reject this, claiming the state can be used to create individual freedom.

**DEVELOPMENTAL INDIVIDUALISM:**

* Modern liberals have based their ideas on a re-interpretation of individualism and freedom. They’re focussed on Mill’s concept of ‘developmental individualism’. This is the belief that individuals who are left alone are unable to develop beyond what Mill calls ‘lower pleasures’. They’re unable to understand the range of choices available to them and therefore were not free.
* Mill suggested that through intervention and education, an individual can develop to understand more complex pleasures and therefore have more freedom.
* This created a justification for an interventionist state, that provided opportunities and challenged barriers to freedom.

**POSITIVE FREEDOM:**

* Some liberals in the 19th century argued that the early capitalist system failed to represent the freedom that liberals sought. Inequality and poverty restricted freedoms for the benefit of the minority. Thinkers such as Green argued that humans should be free to realise their potential.
* Modern liberals connected this with a more altruistic view of human nature- a more positive one. This implied that society should try to create freedom for all. This rejected the classical ‘negative freedom’ and proposed an interventionist, positive freedom. Green argued that individuals should be protected from social barriers such as lack of education or ill health.
* Instead of state intervention being a limit to freedom, it can be used to create better life chances and opportunities. Modern liberals argue that freedom can only exist if the correct social conditions allow it.
* Classical liberals argue that support for positive freedom is socialism, collectivisation and the use of the state. Modern liberals argue that they are still focussed on individual choice and freedom of the individual.

**SOCIAL LIBERALISM (WELFARE):**

* Since the early 20th century, modern liberals have argued that the classical minimal state was bad for both society and the individual. Poverty and ignorance undermines the individual and their freedom. They focus their support for a welfare state on provisions for education, health care, housing and some kind of financial support.
* Modern liberals believe that social welfare is a priority for creating individual freedom.
* Classical liberals have argued that social welfare is ‘socialist collectivisation’. It uses that state to create equality. Modern liberals argue that they are trying to create a greater opportunity of equality and freedom by making peoples life chances more equal. They are not trying to create a greater equality of outcome.
* During the 20th century, liberals saw social welfare as a priority for individual freedom. They developed into social democratic liberals and began to see equality as fairness or ‘social justice’.
* EG: Rawls argued that social justice would be supported by anyone who did not know what their own social circumstance were.

**ECONOMIC MANAGEMENT (KEYNESIANISM):**

* Modern liberals argue that modern industrial economics do not provide general prosperity without economic management, thus rejecting the ‘invisible hand of the free market’ and laissez-faire values.
* Their ideas are based on the works of Keynes, who argued that governments should manage their economies by controlling demand. They could do this through different measures such as state spending and taxation levels.
* Keynes argued that a state should borrow and run a budget deficit, meaning that the state is overspending. This can be paid for by future taxation. This still shows support for capitalism, but is state managed capitalism.
* Classical liberals rejected Keynesian economics as being state managed, collectivised and inefficient. They argue that the economy is too complex to be managed. This argument re-occurred in the 1970s by neo-liberal economists and the New Right.