

The Rhetoric of Liberty – Shaping Opinions & Changing Mindsets in Challenging Environments

Saturday, 20 February 2016

- Chair: Eamonn Butler, Adam Smith Institute, UK
- Bican Sahin, Freedom Research Association, Turkey
- Li Schoolland, TFT Events, China
- Rofi Uddarojat, Centre for Indonesian Policy Studies (CIPS), Indonesia

“If you are constantly negative, you will be ignored.”

- Dr Bican Sahin

Dr Bican Sahin kicked off the session by identifying several political, economic and social issues that classical liberal think tanks work on. Dr Sahin noted that political issues are more dangerous to discuss than economic issues, and that national issues are more risky than local ones. While think tanks may seek to avoid external threats by focusing solely on economic matters at local levels, Dr Sahin admitted that sometimes, “we cannot avoid dealing with political issues at the national level”.

Classifying Turkey as an “illiberal democracy”, Dr Sahin said that his Freedom Research Association had to actively promote itself as an ally to the government, to improve the perception and acceptance of the alternative policies that it proposed. He warned against think tanks presenting themselves as categorically opposed to governments. Instead, they ought to “complement what is good and protest the bad”, while being proactive to ensure communication lines remain open. Dr Sahin also cautioned that “think tanks which constantly harp on the negatives will risk being ignored”. In addition, he noted that relations with international bodies and foreign think tanks are critical - to build international pressure on undemocratic governments and act as a safeguard

against arbitrary crackdowns. Dr Sahin affirmed that such coalitions, on both international and national levels, will be key to build impact in the long run.

Li Schoolland shared many personal stories and anecdotes of how she has been championing freedom movements throughout Asia. Having been born at the height of the Cultural Revolution to an educated family, Mrs Li encountered persecution by the state from an early age. Her father was imprisoned for having made a joke about Jiang Qing, China's first lady, while her mother was made to work long hours every day at a state university. Mrs Li left China for the U.S. in the 1980s – to acquire greater control over her own life.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s, Mrs Li has been running liberal conferences in various countries alongside her husband, Ken Schooland. They first started with countries in the former Soviet bloc in Eastern Europe. They have expanded the reach of their conferences and forums, which now includes China and the Middle East. Mrs Li also runs an economics summer school in Austria every year. She also hosts frequent informal 'parties' - where students are clandestinely educated to spread a spirit of entrepreneurship.

Rofi Uddarajat of the Centre for Indonesian Policy Studies (CIPS) shared of a multitude of obstacles facing CIPS's aim to promote liberty. Opponents include nationalists and socialists on the left, and Islamic conservatives from the right. Mr Rofi admitted that on economic issues, the leftists' hold on policy has been largely unchallengeable. This is because the founders of Indonesia were socialists; thus, socialist theories are part of the fabric of Indonesian public administration and market structures.

In the religious domain, however, many moderate Muslim clerics and groups have risen to challenge conservative views. These groups have actively advocated for greater

liberty in Indonesian society – which has helped advance the work of CIPS. Mr Rofi also spoke about the Indo-Libertarian Initiative, which was introduced by CIPS, to inspire libertarian ideals at the grassroots levels of Indonesian society.