



A SPECIAL MEETING

# THE MONT PELERIN SOCIETY

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**FROM THE PAST TO THE FUTURE:  
IDEAS AND ACTIONS FOR A FREE SOCIETY**

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

### TAKING IDEAS TO ACTION AROUND THE WORLD

BRIDGETT WAGNER



# **Taking Ideas to Action Around the World**

## **Mont Pelerin Society – Stanford, CA**

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I try to close out each year going through files of saved op-eds and speeches that I find inspiring. It's a great way to pull back from the day-to-day skirmishes and put our long war of ideas into the broader context. It's always surprising how relevant I find some of these clippings.

One piece I return to over and over is Jim Buchanan's "Saving the Soul of Classical Liberalism," a *Wall Street Journal* column published on January 1, 2000. I encourage you to read the whole column. It provides great advice for today, but in the context of this morning's session, I was particularly struck with this section:

*The 1950's were dark days for classical liberals. Big Government was an idea tolerated across the political spectrum in Western nations. In those years my colleague Warren Nutter often used to say that 'saving the books' was the minimal objective of classical liberals. At the very least we had to keep liberal ideas in print. Friedrich von Hayek, the free market's great advocate, broadened Nutter's notion to 'saving the ideas.'*

James Buchanan, "Saving the Soul of Classical Liberalism,"  
*The Wall Street Journal*, January 1, 2000

In the age of internet access and information overload, it's difficult to imagine a call to "save the books" or "save the ideas" was made within the lifetime of this society – indeed, within the lifetime of many at this meeting. With online access to academic journals and original sources, it is hard to impress on young people today just how precious books and texts you can hold can be.

I was reminded of this earlier this week in reading through the obituaries of Sir Roger Scruton. One of the many contributions he made during his lifetime was his support for dissident academics in communist Eastern Europe. He helped to support an underground education network by smuggling in books, organizing lectures and courses, and forging links between these academics and their counterparts in the West. Journalist and historian Anne Applebaum tweeted out Scruton's obituary and noted she was one of his student couriers. It was a good reminder that saving the ideas sometimes requires *physical* action.

Today, our fellow MPS member Linda Whetstone has taken up this task through the Network for a Free Society. The network's vision is of a world of opportunity and prosperity based on the foundations of a free society – individual freedom, limited government, the rule of law, the protection of private property, free markets and free speech. By making "the texts and ideas which explore and explain these values accessible in countries and in languages where they are

currently not available” they are increasing the number of people who share these ideas and the commitment to liberty. And in turn, they will become the intellectuals who change the climate of opinion in favor of freedom.

Linda has shared thousands of copies of books and hundreds of thousands of CDs. It’s possible to pack dozens of texts onto a little round disc and ship these to local partners to be shared with students and professors in hard-to-reach corners of the globe. Afghanistan, Iran, Tajikistan, Burundi, and the Democratic Republic of Congo are just some of the places you’ll find these CD’s in use. They spark debates, conferences, trainings and essay competitions; and they help to build an understanding of the role of markets, property rights and the rule of law in creating wealth and improving lives.

As Max Hartwell described in the history of the Mont Pelerin Society:

The great intellectual entrepreneurs like Hayek initiate intellectual change and are ‘the vital few’ in the great battle for ideas, but the impetus to significant changes in the tide of human ideas comes from the many followers who accept the new ideas and circulate them in the academies, in the media, and in the public.<sup>1</sup>

Today there is a vast ecosystem of followers, the second-hand dealers of ideas. Bob Chitester showed us the impact that documentaries can have when he put Milton Friedman in front of a camera. “Free to Choose” educated millions on the basics of market economics, and in the process, prepared the ground for the Reagan Revolution. Russ Roberts’ popular Hayek-Keynes “Fight of the Century” rap videos were a novel translation targeted to a younger generation. College students and teenagers across the country memorized the lyrics and impressed parents everywhere from the back seat in the carpool.

Short videos are reaching a wide audience through the classroom, as in the case of Izzit --or in some cases they go around the classroom, like PragerU. Last year, in one year alone, PragerU had more than one billion views. And, full-length films produced by organizations like Free to Choose Media, Moving Picture Institute or the Acton Institute tell stories and connect emotionally with audiences.

Podcasts, online universities, videos, memes and Twitter debates are today’s tools of engagement. Think tanks devote enormous energy to media outreach and marketing strategies because they understand how important this is in terms of shaping the climate of opinion or changing the contours of the battlefield in the war of ideas.

This morning’s panels point us toward action and ask us to share some examples of how we might successfully move ideas *into action* around the world. I will outline a framework and give you an example of an issue put through this framework. And I’ll share a few practical recommendations from our friends who are in the business of capturing case studies and growing the network.

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<sup>1</sup> R.M. Hartwell, *A History of the Mont Pelerin Society*, Liberty Fund Inc., 1995, p. 228.



## **Changing the Battlefield**

In his 1997 Mont Pelerin Society Presidential Address, Ed Feulner noted:

...it's possible for we liberals to win the war of ideas but nonetheless fail to change the world. Ideas are decisive, but not self-implementing...[it] is not an automatic, straight-forward process. In fact, as public choice theory points out, it is made more difficult by the democratic forces freedom-loving peoples fight to preserve.

How, then, do we translate our ideas into laws that not only block the road to serfdom, but also clear a path to freedom? Today, this has become a key question....how do we return power to the individual?...How do we change the current "calculus of consent"?

Many of you may be familiar with the concept of the "Overton Window" named for the late think tank leader, Joseph Overton. Joe helped lead the Mackinac Center for Public Policy in Michigan. He also helped to train dozens of think tank leaders and championed school choice.

Joe was tireless in his advocacy for school choice, but he also understood that books, white papers and op-eds alone would not win this battle. After all, Milton Friedman first wrote about school choice in 1955 in his essay, "The Role of Government in Education"<sup>2</sup> and again in *Capitalism and Freedom* in 1962.<sup>3</sup>

There is a powerful public school establishment preventing the state's "education Berlin Wall," as Joe called it, from coming down. Unions fight to protect their powerbase and school superintendents fight to maintain their enrollment and funding. This is typical behavior for a subsidized, unaccountable monopoly, as Joe saw it. They treat their clients as hostages, not customers.

Politicians fear the unions and their political war chest. And parents are not as well-organized, particularly low-income parents. Lost in the middle of all this are the students, the hostages.

Joe was a think tank leader, but he was also trained as an engineer so, he analyzed the problem and came up with a solution that drew from Hayek's advice to Antony Fisher.

The story is told and known by many in this society: Following World War II, Sir Antony had an opportunity to meet Professor Hayek at the LSE and seek his advice on how to get the country on the right track. Fisher had read *The Road to Serfdom*, and he thought politics might be the route. Hayek told him not to waste his time. It's the intellectuals who are decisive in the battle of ideas, according to Hayek. They are the ones who shape the contours of the battlefield.

As Joe worked it out, politicians have to operate within the limits of what is acceptable to public opinion, a political safe space or a window. Operate outside the window and you risk losing popular support and maybe even your political office. But this window can be shifted or even

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<sup>2</sup> Milton Friedman. *The Role of Government in Education*. New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1955. Print.

<sup>3</sup> Milton and Rose Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962. Print

expanded by changing the climate of public opinion. And once it has shifted, it can become popular (or even necessary) for a politician to support a position.

How do you shift the window? Most often this is the work of the intellectuals and popularizers, the think tanks and policy entrepreneurs, the activists and investors, the writers and those operating in the culture.

Let me use school choice as an example of shifting the Overton Window to advance a policy idea because it draws on so many of the tools we can use: experts and their research, transparency and accountability, publicity and story-telling, coalition-building, moral authority, and networks that share success and learn from each other.

I should apologize in advance to the education experts like Hoover's own Bill Evers who might be in the room. This will be *very* abbreviated. My intent is not to outline the history of school choice, but to share some of the milestones along the way that allowed the Overton Window to shift, and allowed the politicians to take the next step in moving toward Milton Friedman's vision.

### **It Starts with an Idea**

So, let's start with Milton Friedman. Not only was he one of the vital few generating the ideas, as Bob Chitester pointed out, he was also a popularizer. Episode 6 of the 1980 PBS series, "Free to Choose" focused on "What's Wrong with our Schools?" He starts with the dangerous and failing schools, contrasts them with what's working, zeroes in on parental control as being the key, examines choice experiments, explains how the marketplace works in higher education, and has a very animated series of conversations with the experts -- including the head of the teachers union -- during the discussion portion of the video. All this is beautifully filmed, distilled, and distributed to millions of households in must-watch television. Friedman prepared the battlefield for education reforms to come.

We know that Ronald Reagan was influenced by Friedman. He even filmed a short video praising "Free to Choose" and described it to the viewer as "a survival kit for you, for our nation, and for freedom."

Reagan's first Secretary of Education Terrell Bell came into office with a mandate for reform. He established a National Commission on Excellence in Education that issued a blistering report in 1983 titled, "A Nation at Risk."<sup>4</sup> The report dominated news and launched a nation-wide conversation about the state of our schools and how we should reform them. The conversation took place on both sides of the aisle and drew in local officials, business leaders, and teachers because the commission itself had included local officials, business leaders and teachers. A discussion of reform was not just possible, it was necessary. The first wave of reforms focused on content and testing, but reformers didn't stop there. The window was shifting.

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<sup>4</sup> United States. National Commission on Excellence in Education. *A Nation at Risk: the Imperative for Education Reform: a Report to the Nation and the Secretary of Education*. Washington, D.C.: The Commission: [Supt. Of Docs., U.S. GPO. Distributor], 1983. Print.

Scholars began researching delivery of education, competition, and choice. We saw experiments with schools within schools, and the head of the American Federation of Teachers even came out in support of charter schools in 1988. Businesses and philanthropists stepped in to provide choice scholarships, and this helped to demonstrate demand on the part of low-income parents of children in failing schools. This shifted the window of opinion further.

Parents began to look for the best schools for their child and that required information. You began to see *some* schools treat parents and students as clients and not hostages. And, when demand outstripped the supply of private scholarships, parents began to organize for political change.

In 1990, Milwaukee established the first school choice program in the United States. And, in a way, confirming just how far the debate had shifted, the bill was championed in the state house by a Democratic politician – an African American woman who represented Milwaukee – and the Democratic mayor of Milwaukee. And then in 1991 the Wisconsin Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of the Milwaukee program overcoming legal challenges brought by the state superintendent and the unions.

Today the number of education options is expanding. Not fast enough so, some of us are working on how to address the opposition, namely the unions, with legislation, litigation, and education to expand worker freedom. Teachers and all public employees should be able to choose whether union membership is right for them. And, when given the choice, many have opted to leave their union and stop paying dues, thanks to important Supreme Court litigation, ongoing state litigation, and very active public awareness campaigns led by allies in the states, like the Freedom Foundation, the Mackinac Center, and the Buckeye Institute, which is represented at this conference.

Exposing the opposition and denying them support – both the financial and moral support that they have taken for granted – will have an enormous impact on the freedom agenda.

The Overton Window is a theory of social change that is built on incremental victories. We may want every family to have the ability to access the education that best meets the needs of their child. But to get there we need politicians to take action, and they will only go as far as they think public opinion will allow them to and stay in office. We can change the politicians – and we have seen that work, but we don't always have a Ronald Reagan or Margaret Thatcher waiting in the wings. We can change the climate of opinion, and that paves the way for the good politicians. It also helps move the others to take good actions in the meantime.

### **Opportunities and Challenges**

Today we are seeing the incremental approach, shifting the Overton Window, play out in a number of policy areas. Occupational licensing reform, for example—start with the hair braiders and interior designers and then move on to teachers and doctors. Today, we see states like Arizona passing universal licensing recognition laws. If you have a license in good-standing in one state and you move to Arizona and your current license meets their requirements, there's no need to start all over.

Or health care reform: Allow for health savings accounts, reform your tort liability system, allow for direct primary care, reform certificate of need laws, and you'll start seeing innovation around the traditional models of health care provision. Today, we have CVS "Minute Clinics" and WalMart is experimenting with Health Care Centers in underserved communities with high patient-to-doctor ratios. Patients might get used to being treated as customers. Just imagine, they might start asking about prices. This could create a market place!

We have many challenges in moving ideas into action at the national government level, and not just in the United States. As David Henderson stated in his paper, politicians hear mainly from the beneficiaries of government policies. Well-organized interests are well-represented in their nations' capitals. But in our competitive federalist system here in the United States, policy innovation can occur in the states and local communities. And the ecosystem of think tanks, experts, litigators and activists in the states is strong and growing.

The Heritage Foundation's *Index of Economic Freedom*, the Fraser Institute's *Economic Freedom of the World* index and the World Bank's *Doing Business* report have helped promote economic freedom around the world. There are also indexes that rank states, and the Lithuanian Free Market Institute has a municipal performance index. Atlas Network and the Fraser Institute provide support for economic freedom audits to their more than 450 think tank partners.

These indexes spur competition and help reformers drive change from within their countries. Embassies regularly contact the Heritage Index team to make sure they have taken notice of the latest reforms that might impact the scores. I'm told on the state level, Index authors get the same calls from governors' offices.

They also spur calls to ask *how* they can raise their rankings, and at that point we can say that the Overton Window has shifted. They are ready to talk about reform. Interestingly, each year we see that the most popular portion of the Heritage.org website is our *Index of Economic Freedom*—more than 7.7 million page views in 2019. In presentations to international visitors we point out that the indexes can be used to develop an agenda for reform. Next month, Heritage will release our 2020 Index and a companion volume that will map a reform agenda to move the U.S. to the #1 position in the rankings.

## **Conclusion**

Books, indexes, videos, podcasts, and social media are all great tools, but what if we are not allowed to *express* our ideas? Will they really be saved, as Hayek called on us to do? Ayaan Hirsi Ali has addressed this with regard to higher education in her paper.

Perhaps the greatest challenge we face is the attack on free speech, and this requires action on our part. Let me return to Sir Roger Scruton. Some of you may remember that less than a year ago, a journalist for the *New Statesman* crafted a hit piece which misrepresented his views on a number of issues. The journalist selectively edited and rewrote quotes so as to portray him as a racist. Demands were made for the British government to remove him from an unpaid advisory commission. The government took the bait and sacked Sir Roger.

Eventually, he was vindicated and reinstated, but everyone got the message: Challenge the orthodoxy and you will be dealt with. *And* when it comes to the left, the ends justify the means.

Unfortunately, this episode is repeated much too often with academics and authors on the right -- accusation, twitter mob, media pile on, loss of job, and social ostracism. What are we to do? Retreat is not an option in this battle.

Niall Ferguson looked to the Cold War for lessons in a column in the *Boston Globe* last April:

A direct descendant of the illiberal, egalitarian ideology that once suppressed free speech in Eastern Europe is now shutting down debate in the West.... But the lesson of the Cold War is clear. From now on, an attack on one of us must be considered an attack on all of us.<sup>5</sup>

We must hang together or surely we will hang separately.

At the very end of the history of the society, Max Hartwell provided a discussion of “Assessments and Conclusions.” He measured the work of the society against the founders’ aims and noted the members’ contributions to the revival of liberalism. In summing up, Hartwell asked, “...was not the Society’s role in supporting the individual liberal in the hostile intellectual world of the post-1945 era a sufficient justification for [our] existence?”<sup>6</sup>

I would say this continues to be the most important action we can take today.

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<sup>5</sup> Niall Ferguson, “A message to all professional thinkers – we either hang together or hang separately,” *Boston Globe*, April 15, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> *A History of The Mont Pelerin Society*, p. 231.





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Bridgett Wagner, as vice president for policy promotion at the Washington, DC-based think tank the Heritage Foundation, oversees its coalition relations, Truluck Center for Leadership Development, and Young Leaders Program, among other duties. All of these areas are focused on spreading conservative principles, policies, and ideas among allies, public audiences, interns, young professionals, and new audiences.

Wagner's responsibilities also include advising and consulting with fellow leaders in the think-tank and nonprofit communities. She first joined Heritage in 1981 as a research assistant to the president of the foundation, and she has served in various leadership roles in external relations, events, and fundraising.

Outside of Heritage, Wagner serves as a trustee at the University of Dallas and at the Intercollegiate Studies Institute. She is a director of the State Policy Network, the Foundation for Government Accountability, and the Fund for American Studies. She also serves on the Clare Boothe Luce Selection Committee of the Henry Luce Foundation.

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