

# The passing of a legend

Tim Wilson

In November, freedom lost one of its foremost advocates. Until his passing, Milton Friedman remained committed to the causes he championed. He is best known for his work on monetarism and its adoption by Reagan and Thatcher, but his success stemmed from his commitment to freedom.

Critics have tried to rewrite his history. During the ceremony for his Nobel prize in 1976, protesters attacked him for working with the Pinochet government of Chile. What they ignored was his purpose and achievements. Pinochet brought Friedman to Chile to slay the dragon of hyper-inflation. It was bankrupting the country due to the communist inflationary policies of Salvador Allende. Friedman successfully argued that reducing state intervention in the economy would slow inflation and promote growth. For Friedman, his aim was as much to slow inflation as it was to promote economic freedom.

He believed that by promoting economic freedom, social and political freedom would follow. History shows that he was right. In an interview for the 2002 television series *Commanding Heights: The Battle for the World Economy*, he pointed to the link between the return of democracy in Chile to the economic liberty he was responsible for. He can also take much credit for Chile's wealth that embarrasses neighbouring socialist economies. Not surprisingly, his help to structurally reform an oppressive Chinese communist state did not attract the same ire.

Indeed, Milton Friedman's appearance in *Commanding Heights* was typical of his evangelistic approach. Friedman arguably did more to popularise the lib-



Friedman on *The Open Mind* in 1975

eral tradition than any other great thinker of the past. While not the pinnacle of his influence, there are few other economists who have choirs writing their own songs supporting their message as Friedman did. The flow of tributes following his passing is a testament to his contribution to public debate.

Appearing on the public television interview programme *The Open Mind* in 1975 (the 30-minute exchange is available on Google Video), he was able to present his case for compassionate liberalism firmly but reasonably:

One of the great mistakes is to judge policies and programs by their intentions rather than their results. We all know a famous road that is paved with good intentions. The people who go around talking about their soft heart... unfortunately, it very often extends to their head as well, because the fact is that the programs that are labeled as being for the poor, for the needy, almost always have effects exactly the opposite of those which their well-intentioned sponsors intend them to have.

His documentary, *Free to Choose*, which was converted into a book co-written with his wife Rose Friedman, convinced a generation of Americans that free markets were under attack from the false promise of socialism and the welfare state. When the series was rebroadcast in 1990, it was

introduced by Arnold Schwarzenegger and Ronald Reagan, amongst others, attesting to the impact it had had upon their image of a liberal society.

His 1962 work *Capitalism and Freedom* has sold half a million copies and has been translated into 18 languages. In this accessible work, he lays out convincingly the case against mandatory professional licensing, and for school vouchers. It is necessary to reflect just how radical his school voucher scheme was, given that, in 2006, vouchers are discussed so casually.

The Friedman Foundation was established to champion this cause. Its charter remains the promotion of school choice for parents. Friedman believed that vouchers would marry the benefits of choice with the need for universal access to education.

Despite his work, teacher unions resisted any push for increased demands in an education market. They used the weapons of class envy to promote fears that parents with privilege would top-up the value of their children's education.

Friedman remained undeterred. He said that when parents used money to buy alcohol and cigarettes, no-one complained. When it was spent to top up the financial contribution of their children's education, parents were charged with anti-egalitarianism.

Compared with fighting back the tide of Keynesian economic policy, his work on school vouchers remains unfulfilled. But trials have been held, and the idea has moved from the fringes to the mainstream.

But Friedman's legacy is not the sum of his individual contributions. It is the promise of the benefits of his life's work extending to those who do not now enjoy them.

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