

What is a “free society”?

A brief overview

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The Institute of Applied Ethics at the University of Hull has three research streams: (a) The Free Society; (b) Social Justice and Welfare; and (c) Health and Well-being. Sometimes, people ask what is meant by the phrase “the free society.”

The phrase “free society” is widely used to refer to any political and civic system that has the following characteristics:

1. The rule of law, with a clear and effective separation of powers (executive, legislature and judiciary), and effective checks and balances between those powers.

2. Extensive and diverse areas of public and private life in which individuals can express their views and to discuss those views with other persons, including through acts of collective and personal dissent such as protest:

(a) protected by a robust system of legal rights and obligations, and

(b) protected by a robust system of civic rights and duties: that is,

(i) rights and duties that are

(ii) known to and

(iii) honoured by citizens (iv) in order to serve the common good – that is,

(iv.a) to sustain a network of virtues and institutions

(iv.b) through which individuals and

(iv.c) the communities they form

(iv.d) can lead self-determined lives, and

(iv.e) honoured without the threat of legal sanction.

3. All members of society possess a full set of democratic rights, including but not restricted to the right to vote in the election of those standing to fill the most powerful political offices and to stand for these offices, to join and become active members of political associations that are independent of the state and other powerful bodies (for example, trade unions, corporations, etc.)

4. Active concern by citizens to sustain the conditions of their free society.

5. A free press, with reports and commentary being based on well-founded facts and analysis.

6. Open government, probity of those in public office, and so on.

7. Firm limits on the powers of the people and politicians to infringe on or reduce the above characteristics. That is, these features cannot be infringed even as the result of a democratic vote.

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