Episode 646: How to Debate a Socialist

Guest: John Hajek

WOODS: I want you to straighten out the situation with your last name. Tell me how it should be pronounced, and then tell me how, because of concessions to fallen human nature, it has to be pronounced typically.

HAJEK: Right. Well, technically it is pronounced, "Hayek," and I'm quite proud of that, and my grandmother would insist that everyone pronounce it that way. But everyone kind of has their own way of pronouncing it. I just say "'Hæjek." I get "'Hajek," "'Hæɪjek," "Hə'jek," whatever. "Hæjek" is fine or "Hayek," if you want.

WOODS: Okay, well I'm kind of partial to your grandmother on this point —

HAJEK: Sure.

WOODS: — but I won't dwell on that. I'm going to link on the show notes page, TomWoods.com/646, to this clip that you sent me from YouTube, in which you along with some other folks, you're involved in a debate against the Socialist Alternative, which is a Marxist club on your campus, which is the University of Melbourne in Australia.

HAJEK: Yep.

WOODS: And you were talking about the general subject of capitalism versus socialism, and you were representing the Melbourne University Freedom Society. We're going to link to the Facebook page of that group also on the show notes page. And yeah, so I watched your bit of it, and I just absolutely loved your pugnacious style.

HAJEK: Thank you.

WOODS: It was absolutely a thrill to watch. So you have quite a bit of experience and have had quite a lot of success as a debater, so are there tips you can give us — we'll get to socialism in a minute, but are there tips you can give us about debating in general, no matter what the topic is?

HAJEK: Yeah. I think being in this sort of school, Australian and university debating circle a lot makes you quite aggressive and confrontational in a way, which I think is

particularly effective, particularly for this kind of debate that I did, and I think the tip that's in general important in debating and especially important for the debate that I did against the Socialist Alternative is to never apologize for anything and never concede anything, basically. And also never be afraid to claim that you've won and that the other team has made a pretty dismal case for their side of the debate, which in this case, they definitely did. So yeah, which is why I took no hesitation in pointing out why they made a pretty lackluster case against capitalism and for socialism.

WOODS: I have a friend who gives advice that's somewhat similar to yours. He says that at a debate, there'll be a lot of people who really don't — maybe they have sympathies for one side, but they really don't know a whole lot, so the side that presents its case with the most confidence and with no hesitation and is extremely bold is going to be perceived as the winner, and I think that's an important tip.

HAJEK: Yeah, I think that's very true of this debate. I think at the end of the day, there are some portion of the audience who are going to side with us no matter what, some portion of the audience who are going to side with the socialists no matter what, and I think a lot of portion of the audience who are somewhere in between, noncommittal, and I think it was important for us to have a whole range of statistics and facts explaining why capitalism is excellent and socialism is terrible and a whole lot of economic analysis as well, but I think you also needed a whole lot of fanfare and theatrics, as well, just to make sure you got as many of the people on the side who weren't as interested in economics or couldn't grasp the economic or technical side of it as much, which is why you need to put a bit of insult comedy in there, I reckon as well.

WOODS: How would you describe the experience of debating socialists? Is this the first time you've debated that particular topic?

HAJEK: It is, yeah. But there have been debates like it before, and I'd describe it as very exciting, but I'd say ultimately pretty predictable. There's a pretty formulaic strategy that the socialists have when they engage in a debate like this. By the way, these people are socialists not in the sense of Sweden socialists; they're proper revolutionary Trotskyists. So in a topic like this, that capitalism is better than socialism basically, firstly they say that socialism has never existed before, which absolves them of having to defend any of the dismal failures of socialism in the past. And then they reel off a list of really bad things in the world, only some of which are true, but no matter what, they go to no effort to prove that capitalism is the cause of these and definitely provide no evidence that socialism fixes these problems anyways.

So I was quite prepared for this, because I've seen videos of them engaging in similar debates before, and I sort of knew they were going to make this mistake, which is why I paint them out, particularly in my speech, for losing the debate, because they're basically dodging the motion. Even if they prove that capitalism is bad, which I think they did a pretty bad job of, they can still lose if they provide no evidence that socialism is any better, and we did provide evidence that capitalism is good and

socialism was bad. So I think that was a good strategy to take in that debate. So it's an exciting experience, and it's a predictable experience.

It's also a frustrating experience to some degree, because I'm sure you know it takes so much less time to espouse an economic fallacy than it does to refute one, so they can just fill their whole speech with half-fact after half-fact after misrepresentation, and you can cram quite a lot into a 10-minute speech, and there's just no way that we can possibly get to everything in our speech. And so for example, how long does it take to say, "Profits are derived from exploiting workers," as opposed to saying, "Profits are the premium that capitalists get from affording workers the end product of their labor, such that they'll be willing to work for less than their marginal revenue product at a rate determined by the real interest rate given the markets preference for goods now rather than goods in the future?" I mean, one of those is way easier to say, and that puts them at a big advantage, really.

So I think to some extent, even though we're in my opinion totally right, I think to some extent puts us at a disadvantage, because we're not the team that's willing to use kind of pseudo-economics and casuistry and half-facts to our advantage, and they are, and that's a very powerful thing.

WOODS: What kind of advice can you give people who might — I mean, you might not encounter this style of socialist all that much, but some people might, especially on college campuses. It's possible you could encounter people like this. What kind of advice would you give to people who are faced with that kind of a debate?

HAJEK: Yeah, like I said before, I think it's important to just never apologize for anything and never to concede anything, because they never do, so why should we, is my question. And in the debates that I've seen them do in the past, the people who are often so-called defending capitalism always say, ah, yeah, capitalism's good, but we need to regulate it, there are problems with it, it's not perfect, this, this, and that. I just didn't devote time to any of that in my debate. I think you just explain socialism is a terrible, terrible system and explain that it just simply cannot work no matter what. Even if capitalism is bad, you can't do any better. So be totally forthright, because they always are, even when they have no right to be, I think would be my advice.

WOODS: I want to ask about Australia in a minute, but I want to ask a specific point, and then we'll get back to the political correctness thing a little bit later. But as long as we're talking about debating, is it okay if I read a couple sentences from the email you sent me? Is that all right with you?

HAJEK: Sure.

WOODS: Okay. You're talking about campus culture and political correctness, and you say, I know this has been done to death to some extent, but this is on another level. And you go on to say, "The university debating community in Australia is the worst. For

example, before every debate begins, we now have to go around and ask everyone their gender identity 'to prevent anyone from being misgendered.'"

HAJEK: Yeah.

WOODS: Tell me about that. So did that occur at this debate?

HAJEK: No, this didn't occur in this debate because it was not a formal intervarsity debate, but it does occur at any debating tournaments you do that are in debating societies or between universities. And when I first heard about this new rule that came in about 18 months ago now, I thought, okay, that's unusual, but I'm an open-minded person; there's probably no harm in it; if it stops someone from being misgendered, that's a good thing. But there are a lot of side rules. So at big debating tournaments, we have this thing called women's forums, which are forums ostensibly set up to promote equal opportunity for women in debating, which is totally fair enough.

But basically now, all of these forums are devoted to determining what are to be the rules surrounding this gender pronoun introduction scheme, so they've decided now that you can't say, when asked your gender pronoun, you have to say "he," "she," "they," "no preference," or whatever. You're not allowed to say, "I prefer 'he' or 'she' or whatever," because that implies it's a choice, which is highly otherizing or offensive to some people. You're also not allowed to say, "I want masculine pronouns or feminine pronouns," because that implies that there is such a thing as masculine pronouns and feminine pronouns, which I thought was kind of the point, but apparently not. And you're also especially not allowed to say, when asked, "I don't mind," or, "I don't care," because that's very offensive to people to whom their gender identity's important to them. So yeah, you have to care as well.

WOODS: Boy. Wow, so if these people were in charge somewhere, what a wonderful and free society we would have, right?

HAJEK: I know, yeah. Not very partial to freedom, I'm afraid. You probably couldn't guess from this, but they're not libertarians in general, debating people.

WOODS: Well, I'll get back to your crazy university system in a minute, but let's talk about what's going on in Australia for libertarians. Now, let me tell you my understanding, and you tell me if I'm right or wrong. I told you before we started talking about a guy named Ben O'Neill I've had on the show, who's in Australia, he's a professor there. And he told me that it's his impression that there's something about Australian culture that people are very laid back. They tend not to take strong positions that are extremely one way or extremely the other, so it tends to be more middle of the road, and it's tougher for libertarians to gain traction. I mean, there are libertarians, but if there's a libertarian organization, it tends to be very tame and watered down and lukewarm. Is that your experience?

HAJEK: Yeah, that is pretty much the case. There are two major parties. It's confusing, because what we call the Liberal Party is actually the conservative party, so

it's the equivalent of the Republican Party. Then there's the Labor Party. There's also the Greens Party and a few other parties. And basically the big thing in Australia is that the two main parties aren't very different from each other, which is reasonably true, and they're both fairly middle of the road and boring.

There is, though, one libertarian senator who was elected at the last election, but unfortunately he probably won't be reelected at this election, because they've changed the voting rules, which means that it's a lot harder for so-called microparties to gain seats in the Senate. So probably he'll just have a three-year stint and then might not get reelected, but hopefully he will. So it was very good for us. We were very happy to see someone like him make the Senate. But even I guess the Liberal Democratic Party, which is this party, you know, it's fairly moderate libertarian, you know, reducing taxes, maybe implementing a negative income tax or something like that. So it's very, very hard for serious libertarians to get kind of a foothold in the Australian political debate.

WOODS: Well, given what a numerical minority, which is an understatement, you guys are, I'm curious to know how would you have stumbled upon these ideas in the first place.

HAJEK: Me, well, because I grew up in the People's Republic of Inner Melbourne, I was basically a kind of, you sort of have to be a default Greens supporter, because everyone around here is. We are the only Greens Party seat in the country, so pretty much the most left-wing electorate in the country. And then I think when I was about 11 or 12, all I knew was I sort of wasn't really into this, but I thought, well, if you're not into this side of politics, that means you have to be a kind of bog-standard conservative, so I became what I'd probably now describe as a big government conservative. Not a particular time in my personal history that I'm that proud of.

But when I was about 14 or 15, I started debating with a — just arguing, engaging in this protracted argument with a friend about politics. He more or less espoused what in America would be called a liberal point of view, me a conservative point of view, and I thought I should do some more research and become more literate about these things. And in doing so, I think I changed much more radically than he did, and I discovered, I think first everyone discovers Milton Friedman, and then they discover Hayek and Mises and Walter Williams and Thomas Sowell, and I was just totally blown away by these people. So I don't think there's every any going back, really.

I think one of the things that convinces me that libertarianism, outside of this argument, is more correct is that it's totally a one-way street. I know so many people who are libertarians who used to be socialists or used to be conservatives or whatever. I know no socialists who've said, you know, I used to believe in all this free market nonsense, and now it turns out I did more research, and yeah, government intervention's the answer to all our problems. Or you know, I used to totally buy Ludwig von Mises, and then I read Noam Chomsky, and he just blew it out of the water and took it apart piece by piece. It only ever really seems to go one way, in my experience.

WOODS: Yeah, I think that itself is a revealing fact. All right, there's a lot more for us to talk about. Let's pause to thank our sponsor.

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All right, so we've seen a little bit of the flavor of libertarianism in Australia. Give me a sense of how the battle for liberty, if we might call it that, is going in Australia. What are the key issues, and what kind of successes or failures have there been?

HAJEK: Well, like I said, there's nothing particularly drastic that's being proposed. I guess the most drastic piece of deregulation that's recently being debated is that university fee regulation, where the government proposed to give the universities — still government-owned universities, mostly — the ability to set their own fees absent of government price-fixing, basically. And of course this caused an uproar amongst the socialist types like the people we debated against, who think they should never have to pay for their university education ever. And that eventually pretty much was watered down to the point of nonexistence.

Another thing that's quite important now that there seems to be a lot of debate over are these things called lockout laws. So Queensland and New South Wales, two of the big states, have introduced these laws to stop alcohol-related violence, basically. Ostensibly the laws say that you can't enter a venue after 1:30 a.m. You can't get a shot or a cocktail after 12 a.m., and all alcohol service stops after a certain time in the night, which means basically that all things have to close. And aside from the sort of civil liberties issue, which is very important, there is — I'm not an expert, but there is actually some evidence that suggests that this policy has made this problem worse by forcing people who want to drink a lot to drink as much as possible really quickly before the lockout sets in, which just means you get a lot of people more drunk more quickly all at the same time, which is not a good combination if you're looking to curb violence. So I guess that would have to be the first time that a government policy with a certain intention has produced the opposite result, I guess.

WOODS: Right, indeed, indeed. All right, let's go back; there's got to be more juicy stuff with the universities and the debating world, so fill us in on that. I'm sure there's crazy stuff in the U.S., but I think Australia may have us beat, particularly on that gender thing before every debate. And then the responses that seem quite normal — I bet even the word "normal," of course I'd be thrown out for using the word "normal" — are not allowed. You can't even say, "I don't really mind; whatever you want to call me is fine." You can't do that either.

HAJEK: No. The frustrating thing is all of this stuff has this sort of veneer of compassion, and so if you maybe make fun of these kind of new rules or object to them, then it's kind of taken that you don't care about transgender people or you don't care about women or racial minorities, which is just not true at all. But basically, these things, which are started with good intentions, become a contest of who can be offended by the most.

So at this big tournament last year in Korea, the Australasian Championships, they issued a speech code of how to speak in debates, basically. And one of them was saying, remember to put people's humanity first. So there is a big difference between "poor people," and "people experience impoverishment," and you should use the latter and not the former. So basically they're saying you can't use preceding adjectives anymore. I think that sounds ridiculous, but I guess I wouldn't know, because I'm a white male, and I don't know how offensive it is to referred to with an adjective, I suppose.

And this isn't to do with debating, but the University of New South Wales has issued these speech codes saying that you — so you're not allowed to say that indigenous Australians have been in Australia since around 40,000 years, which is probably the best estimate we have based on historical fact. You have to say indigenous Australians have been here since the Dreaming, which is the spiritual belief of a lot of indigenous Australians. So you have to accept this religious belief, basically, and you're not allowed to just make a statement of historical fact. And I think there would be a much different reaction from student bodies if the university issued a speech code saying that you have to say for the sake of the Christian union that humans have been around for 6,000 years or no more.

WOODS: Yeah, or even using the designation "BC" would outrage them.

HAJEK: Yeah, exactly.

WOODS: Because you're supposed to use "BCE," you know, because — so yeah, the whole thing's ridiculous. We're all pretending that we're not talking about the birth of Christ, when they're using exactly the same dating scheme.

HAJEK: Yeah, and the other thing about this University of New South Wales speech code is that there's quite a large controversy in Australia; indigenous Australians argue, and it's a plausible argument, that the arrival of Europeans was akin to an invasion, and it's controversial, because our Australia Day is on January 26th, which is when the first fleet landed. And so lots of indigenous people argue that it was an invasion, and that's as maybe; that's fine. But University of New South Wales has said you're now not allowed to say "the arrival of Europeans in Australia"; you have to say "the invasion." So you're not even allowed to use like a neutral word anymore jus to signify sort of geographic movement of people. You have to say "invasion," which I think is absurd.

WOODS: Wow, wow, wow. Okay.

HAJEK: Yeah. Another thing that's going on at the moment at my university is this divestment campaign, which is a movement to try and get the universities and institutions to divest from fossil fuel shares, and what they've done is they've basically taken over one of the lawns in the university and set up tents on it, and they've been camping out there I think for a few days now — which I think, at least they're being honest and providing an accurate reflection of how we would live without fossil fuels.

But actually, when people ask me, though, I always say I am in favor of universities divesting from fossil fuels, and they always sound surprised because, you know, you're a decadent capitalist pig, why would you support that? And I say it's because if the big universities dump all their fossil fuel shares, I can come scoop them up at bargain basement prices.

WOODS: There you go, exactly. Dump them on the market, exactly. Yeah, you know, there's a guy in the U.S., Alex Epstein, I had him on, I don't know, 8 zillion episodes ago. But he has a book called *The Moral Case for Fossil Fuels*. Boy, I wish he could go give a talk in Melbourne.

HAJEK: Oh, yeah.

WOODS: That would be something to see, man. That would be something to see.

HAJEK: These protestors just yesterday did a naked protest at the university. They took to one of the roofs of one of the famous buildings of the university and had no clothes on and performed some protest there, so yeah. I don't see sort of libertarian or even conservative clubs doing that kind of protest very often. I can pretty much count on no hands the number of times that's happened.

WOODS: Right. Well, what happens when — I don't know if you know this guy, Milo Yiannopoulos, who's sort of made a name for himself —

HAJEK: Yeah.

WOODS: Yeah, from the UK, and he comes to American universities, and they all have to retreat to their safe spaces and everything. If somebody like that were to come, would there be attempts to disrupt the person, or would they have the safe space thing? What would be the response? Or would they just sit and listen or just not attend, or what?

HAJEK: Oh, no, no. Well, someone far less I guess controversial in terms of their views than Milo was our prime minister at the time — I think this was a year or two ago, a couple years ago — was chased off Deakin University campus because of security threats about people protesting his speaking there. So you know, he's not exactly a total rogue, an outsider, an extremist; he's the prime minister of Australia. So if someone like that gets chased off a university campus — I wasn't there at the time, but I'm willing to bet there probably weren't many libertarian, conservative students involved in this protest. I just get that feeling, somehow.

WOODS: I have a funny feeling that you might be right about that.

HAJEK: Yeah, I don't know why. It's this hunch.

WOODS: Does your student group — let's see, it's Melbourne University Free Society. Does it get university funding, and/or do you do fundraisers for outside funds?

HAJEK: Yeah, we get funding from the university, and we also survive on donations, basically.

WOODS: All right, well, see, look, I would do — not that you guys have the time as students, but I always found the time. I did all kinds of extracurricular stuff as an undergrad. I would make — see, I am a big believer in the free eBook, because it just does so much. It gets your name out there; it gets people consuming your material; you put links to what you're doing in there. It just does a lot of — and you could use it as a way of generating a little donation here or there. I mean, you could do a little eBook about — I mean, I bet a lot of regular Australians have no idea what's going on on the campuses. You just do a little write-up of the things you see, take some pictures, put the craziest pictures you can on the cover as a montage, and particularly people screaming. And then maybe you call the eBook *The Savages of Australia*. And I'm telling you, you would move a lot of copies of that. Position it as a fundraiser: hey, if you like what we're doing, please send us a donation. If that doesn't raise money for you, I'll send you a 1,000 USD. That's my deal.

HAJEK: Excellent. Well, I actually work for this think-tank called the Institute of Public Affairs. It's the oldest free market think-tank in the world. But I work for them as what's called a campus coordinator, so I'm their guy at Melbourne University. I organize events for them, like this debate, for example. And we've got something in the pipe called "Overheard on Campus" —

WOODS: Okay, good.

HAJEK: — documenting things that crazy people say on campus and publishing them somehow. So for example, this is not necessarily staff, also students. I've heard debating people say, oh, you know, I don't really care that much about 9/11, because it was just a bunch of white people dying. Or, oh, if I knew I were pregnant with a boy, I would get an abortion right away, because I couldn't live with myself knowing that I brought someone into the world who could go on to assault a woman or something like that. So I think if people know that there are people making sick statements like this — it's important for people to know that, I think.

WOODS: Yeah, yeah, I think that is important. Now, is your Institute of Public Affairs, does that have any connection to the Institute of Public Affairs in the UK?

HAJEK: No.

WOODS: Okay, because it actually is called the Institute of Public Affairs, and it's also a libertarian think-tank, and they've done really great stuff, too.

HAJEK: I think there's —

WOODS: So all right — yeah, go ahead.

HAJEK: — an Institute of Public Affairs in Poland or something as well, but I don't think we're related in any way.

WOODS: Well, it's just funny that it would be such a mainstream-sounding name and then turn out to be a libertarian group, so I thought maybe it was some kind of an empire being run out of the UK, but it turns out that it's not.

HAJEK: Well, that's what the socialists think we are, you know, that we've got billions of dollars of funding and we write all policy behind the scenes. That's not the case. And they're a lot more optimistic than we are, basically. From this debate, they were saying that we are just living on the precipice of all these radical acts of deregulation and tax cuts and spending cuts, and I was saying, well, I sort of hope you're right, but —

WOODS: Yeah, somehow I think that's hysteria instead of —

HAJEK: Too optimistic, yeah.

WOODS: Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah. All right, look, this is a lot of fun. As I said, I'm going to make sure I — in fact, let me make sure I write this down, because I'd be heartbroken if I forgot to put that YouTube up of you guys debating capitalism and socialism. Put that up, and I'll get your Twitter up there; we'll get your Facebook page for your group up there. All these things will be at TomWoods.com/646. Any parting thoughts for us from Australia?

HAJEK: Oh, just that the Socialist Alternative have asked me to do another debate against their people at Monash University, by the way, so stay tuned for another debate, if you're interested.

WOODS: Okay, sounds great, sounds great. Well, good luck with that, and thanks for chatting with me today.

HAJEK: Thank you, it's a pleasure.