

Freedom for Sale – How we made money and lost our liberty by John Kampfner.  
Simon and Schuster 2009.

As surveillance cameras appear everywhere in our scepter'd isle, and frequent allegations are made about the stretching of various anti-terrorist laws by the UK police, Freedom for Sale is a timely warning to us all, persuasively demonstrating how we are sleepwalking into a state where the freedoms we once took for granted are nowhere near as secure as we might have imagined.

Kampfner's essential thesis is that in many societies people are willing to sacrifice some of their liberties as long as they feel secure and relatively prosperous. To demonstrate the phenomenon he travels widely, encountering an extraordinary similarity in attitudes among the citizens he meets, and a parallel erosion of liberties or rigid state control.

Freedom for Sale is divided into eight chapters with an introduction and conclusion: Singapore: Comfortable Model, China: Discreet Player, Russia: Angry Capitalist, United Arab Emirates: Easy Money, India: Populous Alternative, Italy: One Man Show, Britain: Surveillance State, USA: Tainted Dream. Each chapter recounts visits that Kampfner has made to these countries and meetings with ordinary people as well as members of the intelligentsia and business leaders.

The picture that Kampfner paints is a highly disturbing one, and although one has always been able to resort to smug self-satisfaction about the nature of British freedom and democracy he makes clear that to do so now would be self-deluding. We may choose to comfort ourselves with the thought that the tightening of the law protects us as we are, but we cannot state with certainty that, with global warming likely to pose huge challenges to our current way of life and living standards, we will always be as we are, and should that day dawn we may find ourselves swathed in a strait jacket placed on us by stealth and accepted without a struggle which makes our lives intolerable.

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