There are old and convincing arguments for intellectual liberty in all of its forms — freedom to think, to speak, to publish. Part of the pull of these arguments is that they appeal to assumptions we who have been brought up in Western democratic countries take for granted. But whether we do more than “take them for granted” — whether we have the commitment to make those assumptions operative, or whether they have become a kind of hypocrisy — is another question. In Doris Lessing’s great novel *The Golden Notebook*, the American, Saul Green, says to Anna “That’s why I love this country [England], it [MacCarthyism] couldn’t happen here”. Anna’s reaction is decidedly not agreement that McCarthyism couldn’t happen in England.

Because what he said was sentimental, stock from the liberal cupboard. I said, ‘During the cold war, when communist hue and cry was at its height, the intellectuals here were the same. I know everyone’s forgotten about it, now everyone’s shocked at McCarthy, but at the same time our intellectuals were playing it down, saying things were not as bad as they seemed. Just as their opposite numbers were doing in the States. Our liberals were mostly defending, either openly or by implication, the anti-American activity committee. A leading editor could write a hysterical letter to the gutter press saying if only he’d known that X and Y, who were old friends of his, were spies, he’d have gone straight to M.I.5 with information about them. No one thought the worse of him. And all the literary societies and organizations were engaged in the most primitive form of anti-communism — what they said, or a great deal of it, was quite true of course, but the point is, they were simply saying what might have been found any day in the gutter press, no attempt to really understand anything, they were in full cry, a pack of barking dogs. And so I know quite well that if the heat had been turned on even a little harder, we’d have had our intellectuals packing anti-British activities committees, and meanwhile we, the reds, were lying black is white’. ‘Well?”
“Well, judging from what we’ve seen happening in the last thirty years, in the democracies, let alone the dictatorships, the number of people in a country really prepared to stand against a current, really ready to fight for the truth at all costs is so small that...”

He suddenly said, ‘Excuse me’, and walked out with his stiff blind walk.

I sat in the kitchen and thought over what I’d just said. I and the people I knew well, some of them fine people, had been sunk inside the communist conformity and lied to themselves or to others. And the ‘liberal’ intellectuals could be and had been swung into witch-hunts of one kind or another very easily. Very few people really care about freedom, about liberty, about the truth, very few. Very few people have guts on which a real democracy has to depend. Without people with that sort of guts a real democracy dies, or cannot be born.

And Anna sits there, “discouraged and depressed. Because in all of us brought up in a Western democracy there is this built-in belief that freedom and liberty will strengthen, will survive pressures, and the belief seems to survive any evidence against it. This belief is probably in itself a danger. Sitting there I had a vision of the world with nations, systems, economic blocks, hardening and consolidating; a world where it would become increasingly ludicrous even to talk about freedom, or the individual conscience. I know that this sort of vision has been written about, its something one has read, but for a moment it wasn’t words, ideas, but something I felt, in the substance of my flesh and nerves, as true”.

I begin with this extended quotation, because the tough-minded novelist has a kind of realism about the issue of intellectual freedom that is missing in academic discussions. But the philosophical questions are nonetheless worth pursuing. Belief in liberty may need “people with guts” to survive, as Doris Lessing says, but why are we so convinced that it should survive, that it would be a tragic loss if the world should “harden and consolidate” into “nations, systems, economic blocks” without intellectual liberty?

Two major arguments (or groups of arguments, for each has many forms) have been offered for intellectual liberty — and both are powerful. The first I shall call the Utilitarian argument, and the second the Kantian argument. The Utilitarian argument, in its simplest form, is that without intellectual liberty, freedom of thought and speech, any Party and any government will harden into an