



Finding fairness for the future

Roger Liddle

Social democrats need to construct a new narrative of “fairness” in order to ensure greater individual fulfilment within a strong society were we all owe obligations to each other

Social democrats often behave as though we think “fairness” is a self evident concept of redistributive justice. We see ourselves, rightly, as the custodians of “fairness”. But as Patrick Diamond and I point out in our edited collection of essays *Beyond New Labour* (Politico’s, 2009) this is self-evidently not the case: the social justice rationale for many policies is rarely set out in an explicit way.

This has fuelled alternative and misguided perceptions of “fairness”, or, more accurately, “unfairness”: that, for instance, new arrivals in Britain worsen social conditions for the existing population, or that asylum seekers benefit from unfairly favourable treatment. The familiar criticism, however, that the New Labour conception of fairness is flawed because it focuses exclusively on poverty rather than inequality is only half true.

In many respects, New Labour can be criticised for largely ignoring the issue of incomes racing away at the top. Yet to charge, as Adam Smith perhaps would have done, that the “disposition to admire, and almost worship, the rich and powerful, and to despise, or, at least, to neglect persons of poor and mean condition ... is ... the great and most universal cause of the corruption of our moral sentiments” holds in the case of New Labour misses the point.

While it is true that New Labour under-estimated the profundity and complexity of the challenges posed by inequality in twenty-first century Britain, there was and remains no clear social consensus about what rewards are deserved and undeserved. This is why its more ambitious targets have proved so difficult to meet.

And, in any case, for many working families, their strongest feelings about “fairness” are reserved for the “out of work” on benefits or the procedural justice of whether and when new arrivals in the United Kingdom should enjoy welfare state entitlements, such as social housing.

Of course the idea that a broad and diverse range of people can unite around the righting of self-evident injustices is one of the foundation stones of our social liberal and progressive tradition. Progressives don't have to agree on everything before they muster the courage to take the next step.

In his new book *Theory of Justice* Amartya Sen chips away at the logical certainties of social democratic Rawlsianism – often the guiding leitmotif of the centre-left during the final quarter of the twentieth century – with his “difference principle”. This is the notion that differential rewards are morally justified to the extent that the existence of incentives enables the economic position of those at the bottom of the pile to be raised.

Nevertheless, Sen is a sceptic of “transcendental institutionalists” like Rawls: the intellectual tradition that stretches from Hobbes through theories of the “social contract” and is basically about working out what a perfectly just world would look like. This quest is about defining what the institutions and rules of such a perfect society should be. His focus is on righting injustices in order to bring about a better, but not a perfect world.

Sen is attracted to this approach because it enables him to think logically about the quest for “global justice”. For the transcendental institutionalist, global justice is a chimera because justice depends on putting in place institutions and rules that in the absence of world government exist hardly at all at a global level.

But it is in the search for principles of global justice that Sen has developed the ideas with which he is now most associated: the notion of every individual's entitlement to certain “capabilities” which are essential to her or his essential “functioning”.

To me there is a lot more than this in the “capabilities” idea: we need to think harder about its application to nation state social democracy as well as global justice. Rather than pursuing an irresolvable debate between equality of opportunity and equality of outcome, it speaks to a more individualist age.

Notwithstanding this individualism, however, it is worth remembering that individual “capabilities” for those who lack them can only be enhanced through a more effective state. And, more to the point, that the greater individual fulfilment that Sen's more “effective functioning” is seeking to bring about can only be realised in the context of a strong society where we owe obligations to each other.

Roger Liddle is chair of Policy Network

His latest book is “Beyond New Labour: The future of social democracy in Britain” (with Patrick Diamond, 2009)