

## The Best Possible Society?

Sometime later this year, there will be a General Election. It is part of the process of democracy that has defined our country for hundreds of years. The various political parties will put forward competing visions of society, encapsulated in their manifestos – the blueprints for their planned laws. Then the people will decide. However, few voters will give much time to understanding the thinking and philosophy that will underpin each political party's plans.

Politics is about trying to improve peoples' lives. To do that you have to know what you are working towards. Over the years, many people have imagined what a perfect society might look like. Plato began it with *The Republic*, then came Thomas More's *Utopia*, Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, Butler's *Erewhon*, and the dystopian societies of *1984* and *Brave New World*. All were exercises in imagining a different society. Political thinkers do little else but imagine different forms our society could take. But our society seems to be at a crossroads. There is a growing disenchantment with our liberal democracy. The three main ways of organising ourselves – communism, socialism and capitalism - seem to be losing their attraction. In their place we see a growing desire for the easy and false answers offered by populism. Worse still there is also an appetite for authoritarianism – the lawless rule of so-called 'strong men'. In that context, we all have a role to play in thinking about how to organise society for the benefit of everyone, avoiding populism that threatens the moral order. But no new system has emerged to present an alternative.

That's what I thought we might try this morning. Here is a thought experiment to help us along. Imagine you have not yet been born. Let's picture an imaginary heavenly waiting-room for babies that are waiting for their moment. You and everyone else in the waiting room is a spirit without any body yet. You are conscious and aware, but you don't yet know your race, ethnicity, gender, the wealth of your future family, your mental or physical abilities. Nor do you know anything about the society into which you will be born. You don't know its political system, economic system, economic development or class system.

This is the challenge and the question. Given that you are going to live a life in a human society, but you have no idea what you are like or what you will face, what would be the best possible society to be born into? If you don't know anything of your circumstances, can you imagine what kind of society would maximise your chances to have a happy life? You had better not set up a society that favours one attribute over another, or discriminates, because you don't know whether you will have that attribute. Therefore, you are likely to imagine a society that does not favour anyone over another but treats all fairly and justly.

Those are the fundamentals – justice and fairness. If everything is unjust and unfair, no one has anything; if we know what is just and fair we are well on the way to understanding what the best possible society looks like – because (arguably) that society is founded upon creating the maximum amount of fairness and justice for all.

Let's go forward with some further assumptions. We should probably start with the beliefs that everyone should be free, that everyone is equal and that we value fairness. That might seem obvious, but there have been and there still are plenty of societies on the planet that do not share those assumptions. And there are tensions within those assumptions. Freedom and equality do not always get along. Some more socialist societies have limited individual freedom to promote general equality and some more libertarian societies have limited equality to maximise freedom. We had better add a further assumption here – that the society

is rich enough to meet everyone's basic needs. You can't really have a fair society in a failing state. By definition, it would be unjust. The last thing we need to agree on is that some kind of co-operation between citizens is necessary to allow everyone to lead successful lives. If we are at perpetual war with each other, there can be no justice.

The just society we seek will be defined by its institutions: its politics, law, economy, social structure, etc. It is through these mechanisms that the people's needs will be met fairly.

In the thought experiment, you will need to agree on the foundations of the best possible society with everyone else in the heavenly waiting room. I guess you are all going to agree on something that gives everyone their best chance. You are going to want to maximise everyone's access to the best things in life. Further, if everyone enjoys minimum basic liberties, then you are likely to have a co-operative society, where everyone helps each other. There is also likely to be more social harmony, as no-one would have a grievance that they are denied something.

Of course, once you leave the heavenly waiting room and are all born, you will discover that some have more talent in this area than others or enjoy a benefit that exceeds the minimum agreed for all. In those circumstances, it is not fair or just to remove that benefit, but it is right that those who are better off make sure their advantage also benefits their fellow citizens and does not deprive them of their basic rights.

As we said earlier, we will need to find a way to ensure that the society promotes the freedom and equality of each citizen, which will be the basis for each citizen's self-respect. That their society is built around giving everyone self-respect allows citizens to have the confidence to go after the best things in life and chase their aspirations. Whether poor or rich, citizens will see that their economy works toward the advantage of all.

And now we can get closer to the details of how the best possible society might be organised. The politics needs to be free of special interest and serve everyone, so it must be kept clean of the corruption of wealth and influence.

Laws should be devised to promote equality of opportunity (not outcome), and be supported by fair access to education, health care and employment. On the principle that a rising tide lifts all ships, the goal is an economic system that maximizes the position of the worst-off group. We need to avoid the creation of the two extremes: a demoralised under-class, or a super wealthy elite. At present, our society has both.

At the heart of this imaginative exercise is the insight that a just society can only be created by dealing with each individual within that society and the bonds that unite them. It is founded upon a shared perspective, which gives equal value to every member of the society. That shared point of view allows everyone to make rational decisions about what is best for all, free from personal self-interest. There can be argument within the society on what is best, but it is an argument that allows for real debate, as all points of view are underpinned by the same assumptions. Such an argument is not open to Republicans and Democrats in America, or Labour and Conservatives in the UK. Those groups do not share common intellectual ground and their talk is little more than simple assertion and rejection.

This whole thought experiment and this vision of a perfect society are not my own, of course. This point of view is put in the philosopher John Rawls' Theory of Justice. Written in 1972, it has become increasingly influential. Arguably, it is more of an influence upon current Labour Party thinking than any socialist text.

I hope you will all have an influence on the society of the future. I hope you will lead, in some way, as part of the world to come. As leaders, you will need to know what society you want to help create. Are you just in it for yourself? Are you motivated by resentment and envy? Or are you interested in justice and fairness? You might do well to explore the work of John Rawls and other political thinkers.