Case for equality

Margaret Drabble
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"Only a society which can imagine the plight of its weakest members, and legislate for their inclusion into society rather than their virtual expulsion from it, can call itself a just or equal society. I remain a renegade, with Shaw, in my view that some form of equality of income is a crucial component of socialism and of a just society, and could it be introduced as a visionary millenarian experiment in the year 2000 I would raise my glass of as yet unharvested champagne and drink to its success."


This is the text of a speech delivered to the Progressive League on 22 April 1988.

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Twenty years ago I believed myself to be an egalitarian, and I would like to think I am one now. Twenty years ago, a profession of faith in egalitarianism was not considered improper or eccentric. It is now. By some shift of usage, by some change in the climate of thought, egalitarianism has become a dirty word, a devalued word. It would take an Isaiah Berlin to trace the nature of this slippage, and I wish I had thought earlier of keeping a record of usage by politicians and journalists. As it is, I must rely partly on my impressions. But I do remember that during one of the recent debates on the Education Bill Kenneth Baker defended himself warmly against the suspected charge that the proposal of a core curriculum would be ‘egalitarian’: he assured listeners of (I think) the Today programme of the BBC that it would be no such thing. ‘Egalitarianism’ in his book was a dead duck.

The Shorter Oxford Dictionary is not very helpful on the definition of the word. It tells us that the word egality, meaning equality, was re coined by Tennyson, and that egalitarianism is that which asserts egality or equality. (Tennyson’s reference, incidentally, is hostile, intended to summon up the loathed French egalities of the French Revolution.) I shall suppose that egalitarianism is, as it were, an advanced state of faith in equality, an as-it-were unqualified, across the board assertion of the need for and desirability of equality in all significant areas of life.

I am supported in this by the American philosopher John Rawls, who in his hugely important and relevant treatise, A Theory of Justice (Oxford, 1972), uses the word rarely, and who defines it in this sentence: ‘Strict egalitarianism, the doctrine which insists upon an equal distribution of all primary goods’, and concedes that this doctrine (unlike other modified concepts of equality which he holds up for our inspection) may indeed conceivably spring, as its opponents always assert, from the human propensity to envy.

Rawls argues that it is possible to believe in equality without believing in egalitarianism, and he bases his concept of a just society on what he calls the two principles of justice:

- each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others;
- social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both a) reasonably expected to be to everyone’s advantage and b) attached to positions and offices open to all.

In his view, in a society rightly ordered on these principles, envy, at least in its more harmful and painful manifestations, will wither away. For each will know that another’s advantage is also his or her own advantage, and that society is justly and fairly organised. Surviving inequalities will be of such an insignificant and unobtrusive nature that they will not disturb the harmony and cohesion of social bonds. In many ways I accept his arguments (as far as I, a non-philosopher, can follow them) and find them humane, rational, and objectively presented. A social
organisation as proposed for us by an impartial—not even, by his own account, necessarily benevolent—Rawls on these principles would certainly be a good deal more equal, just and fair than the society we or he now inhabit.

But while I concede this, and honour his desire to rethink social contract theory in a workable manner which does not stifle or discount the human forces of energy and competition (words now as ‘good’ as ‘egalitarianism’ is ‘bad’), there is still something in me that hankers after the old, sweeping, all-embracing, passionate egalitarianism of yesteryear. The ‘moral geometry’ of Rawls is finely-tuned, carefully calculated, in line with—though of course carefully dissenting from—the programmes of the great Utilitarians of the last century—but it does not rouse a sense of deep commitment. Perhaps commitment is bad, perhaps emotion in politics and political theory is to be avoided. But let me express some of my own lingering, outmoded Utopian dreams.

Childhood

I do not know why I should from childhood have had such a concern with the nature of equality and unfairness. These concerns grow in the nursery, and are fostered by family life. “That’s unfair!” is inevitably the cry of the middle child, squashed between two siblings in the back of the car on an outing from grimey Sheffield to the beauties of the Peak District. “That’s unfair!” cries the oldest daughter, retrospectively, when the middle child is allowed to graduate earlier to lipstick, high heels, late nights, a door key. “That’s unfair!” cries the third daughter, who suspects, rightly, that her parents often forget her existence altogether. And “That’s unfair!” shout all three daughters when a little brother is born into the family and becomes the adored recipient of all the advantages that are still heaped upon boys rather than girls, even in the most socialist-feminist, the most would-be egalitarian of households. This is a common story, and every family has its own pattern of injustices, and almost every parent attempts to minimise these injustices.

According to Rawls, Freud argues that the very concept of justice itself is born from infant jealousies and envies, that the energy that motivates the sense of justice is borrowed from that of envy and jealousy, and that without this energy there would be no (or much less) desire to give justice. I find this argument very attractive, psychologically and autobiographically. But of course even if true, this Freudian derivation of a need for and sense of justice does not render it suspect or worthless, as some conservative and indeed socialist critics argue.

I was brought up with a concern for fairness, by socialist parents who did not always practise what they preached but who certainly took many personal and professional risks for their convictions. They had both been brought up in South Yorkshire, my mother in a working class family, my father in a lower-middle class family. They both were grammar school educated, and both worked their own way—the first in either family ever to have any higher education—to Cambridge. The contrasts that they witnessed, not only at Cambridge but within the small mining towns of Yorkshire, made them socialists for life—or almost for life. My father stood twice, unsuccessfully, as Labour candidate in hopeless seats—one of which, in the post-war upheaval of 1945, he to his astonishment very nearly won. He was a barrister, then a County Court judge, and I need not tell you how isolated he was from most of his colleagues in his political opinions. He was almost a leper, and in his years at the bar in Sheffield endured constant denigration from the right-wing local press. My mother’s opinions were equally unacceptable in the National Council of Women and the local greengrocer’s. So we were brought up in a natural posture of beleaguered dissent, and with all the difficulties and contradictions that middle class child-
ren of professional parents encounter when they do not toe the party line.

I am not sure at what stage I found myself growing, in theory at least, more radical, more egalitarian than my parents. Pragmatically, they had sent us away to a Quaker boarding school that would teach us to avoid the culture shock my parents had suffered at Cambridge and the bar, while preserving as much as possible of our social and democratic principles—a compromise decision, and one which they would not have dreamed of NOT making. Equality of educational opportunity may have been a principle they would have supported, but in practice they knew they could not afford it. They could not afford not to spend money on our education.

It was this injustice—the injustice of privilege—that first alerted me to the dream of real equality, to the dream of the world really and truly open to all the talents. All sorts of wild thoughts began to occupy my mind. We were all told we were of equal value as human beings, equal in the eyes of God, and all that sort of stuff—why on earth didn’t we do something about it? If we were all equal, why was it that some people had more money than others, better houses, better schools, higher life expectancy, nicer food? My egalitarianism knew no bounds. It was religious, absolute. I wanted us all to have the same wage. Equal rights, equal pay, equal cash. The only just society, I used to argue, is a society which not only offers equal opportunity to all, but also offers equal material goods to all, regardless of merit or desert or birth or inheritance. This proposition was not found quite so ludicrous 20 or 30 years ago as it is now, and I used to be able to get people to discuss the concept of the equal wage quite seriously. And I had one ally—Bernard Shaw.

Bernard Shaw

It is often a mistake to return to the heroes of texts of one’s youth, but I found my return to Shaw immensely stimulating. Some of Shaw’s remarks seem at least as apposite today as they did when first uttered, for although we have had successive Labour Governments and great changes in taxation systems and the redistribution of wealth, we have not, I would argue, come anywhere near the equal or just society of which we once dreamed. In fact, the equal and just society receded like shimmering mirage, and we have almost been bludgeoned into accepting injustice and inequality as necessary conditions for the Good Life of the Many. The recent use of high unemployment as a means of defeating inflation is a case in point, and a case which has been accepted by some who feel ashamed of themselves for accepting it. In such a dire, defeatist climate, it is salutary to turn to Shaw once more.

First, from the Case for Equality, a paper delivered to the National Liberal Club on 1 May 1913, Shaw opens strongly: “When I speak of the Case for Equality I mean human equality; and that, of course, can only mean one thing: it means equality of income. It means that if one person is to have half-a-crown, the other is to have two and sixpence. It means that precisely. The difficulty (with equality of opportunity) is that it is entirely and completely and eternally impossible. How are you going to give everybody in this room equal opportunities with me of writing plays? The thing is, I say, a ghastly mockery. In one sense it might be said, ‘well, any of us are welcome to try our hands at playwriting’. I might say that and smile. But I am quite safe in saying that to the majority of you it is just exactly like saying to a beggar: ‘Well, my friend, Mr Barnato made a large fortune; you have the same opportunities as Mr Barnato; go and earn that fortune; at which Mr Barnato would smile; but it is of no use at all to the beggar. The fact is that you cannot equalise anything about human beings except their income’.

He goes on to justify the undifferentiated old age pension, and to point out the absurdities of trying to distinguish
financially by merit, talent or hard work between, say, playwrights, dustmen, kings and policemen, between judges and soldiers. There is at the moment, he tells us, no true equality either of income or opportunity and castigates "that silly dream of the nineteenth century, which began with 'the career open to the talents', the idea that every man could get his value; all that is the vainest most Utopian dream; and the most impracticable, the most ridiculous idea that ever came into the heads of men. The reason why it was talked about so much is that the people who were talking about it had no serious idea of ever bringing it into practice and never pleaded it in practice except as an excuse for giving somebody less than themselves". He continues to argue that as long as we have inequality of income, we will continue to have class government of the worst description, supported by newspapers in the hands of the plutocracy and the inherited notions of oligarchy.

His attacks on the inequalities of the class system are as relevant today as they were when first uttered. And his views on the misuse of riches and the superfluity of wealth still have a familiar ring to them, although the conditions of poverty have altered greatly: "If one man has not enough money to feed his children properly, and another man has so much that after feeding and clothing and lodging himself and his family as luxuriously as possible he still has a large surplus fund, you will find that the richer man will take his surplus purchasing power into the market, and by that purchasing power set the labour of the country, which ought to be devoted to producing more food for people who have not enough food, to the production of 80 horsepower motor cars, and yachts and jewels, and boxes at the opera, and to the construction of such towns as Nice and Monte Carlo. ... if you allow the purchasing power of one class to fall below the level of the vital necessities of subsistence and at the same time allow the purchasing power of another class to rise considerably above it into the region of luxuries, then you will inevitably find that those people with the superfluity determine production to the output of luxuries, while at the same time the necessities that are wanted at the other end cannot be sold, and are therefore not produced".

Variety of choice

These remarks still seem to me to be apposite, although the nature of the necessities defined by Shaw have changed, from basic foodstuffs, say, to the basic public goods we once thought permanently gained by the welfare state—health care, housing, transport, education. Shaw is familiar with the argument that employing people to make luxury cars and yachts creates jobs, but argues against the excesses of unequal distribution in another paper of much the same period: "A gentleman leaving his son without a tutor or a daughter without a governess in order that he may have a footman on the box of his carriage is hardly considered a good parent: but what of the nation that employs large bodies of men and women as valets, ladies' maids, jockeys, gamekeepers, jewelers, and modistes, when it has not enough builders, plumbers, bakers, greengrocers, tailors, dressmakers, weavers and spinners to supply the first needs of its citizens! What sort of political economy does such folly call itself?" (The Simple Truth about Socialism. 1910).

He is aware, too, of the charge against socialism and equality that insists they will bring a dull and joyless uniformity. He is not against variety, oddity, eccentricity, he assures us—and his own lifestyle certainly bore this out—and he argues that we will have more variety with more equality of income, not less. More talents will flourish, more oddly and variously—and, with the present inequalities, he points out, how sheepish, how conventional, how impoverished we are, how prescribed and regulated by the tyranny of class and convention! And we are as timid today—it is left to
the House of Lords, the actors and the painters and the eccentrics to argue against Clause 28 and the curtailing of our freedom to be whatever we eccentrically choose to be in our own public lifestyle and in the privacy of our own bedrooms. Nor have I ever been able to follow the argument that the more money the rich have, the more rich and various will our diversions become, whereas if the poor have more money, these rich and various forms of self-expression will somehow be beaten down into a grey porridge or a tasteless shepherd's pie.

In Dickens' day, the poor loved oysters. The only reason why they do not eat oysters now is because they cannot afford them. Oysters still taste the same as they always did—they are one of the few foodstuffs that do—and they are actually more delicious, more juicy, less tough and leathery than whelks. I like oysters. In New Zealand recently I ate a lot of oysters. Oysters were in season in New Zealand. They did not cost a lot of money. For five dollars you could get a little cardboard pot of take-away oysters, much as you can still purchase in this country excellent cheap take-away prawns and not-quite-so-excellent whelks from the barrow. A redistribution of income would not ruin the savour of an oyster. It would not condemn the dons of Oxford and Cambridge to a diet of whelks and chip butties. It would offer real choice, not the illusion of choice. Nor would it condemn us all to living in Council blocks with second-hand Utility furniture and sagging mattresses and three ducks on the wall and foam-filled lethal cheap three-piece suites. No, we would be able to choose better furniture, more various styles of architecture, less lethal three-piece suites. We could continue to be free to choose the ducks on the wall if we wished, just as cabinet ministers and company directors and disc jockeys and pop stars and other members of our present plutocracy are now free to indulge their cultured preferences for fake antique deep-buttoned leather armchairs, mock antique farmhouse-style kitchen fit-


ing, jacuzzis, solariums, Laura Ashley, leather-bound books that are never opened (but which do nicely furnish a room), granite-faced Tissot watches, flamingo-shaped brooches made of real rubies, sentimental oil or pastel portraits of their wives, offspring or Scottie dogs, and Collector's Item porcelain plates with hand-drawn reproductions of members of the Royal Family.

What Bernard Shaw did not, perhaps, foresee was the new tyranny of fear that has been born from an unequal society. Britain today, we are repeatedly told by the press and the politicians, is richer under Thatcherite monetarism, with the newly released competitive energies of the market place, than it has been for decades. How odd, then, if this is so, that we should be so nervous, so alarmist, so frightened of walking the streets at night or taking public transport of an evening. Should we not feel safer, more protected in the citadel of our own money? We are not, we know, and we know although we do not admit it, that we live in a society so unjust and unequal that groups within it declare unofficial war on other groups. Equality of opportunity, the career open to the talents, these are as black a joke to the black youths of Brixton or Broadwater Farm as the same concepts seemed to Shaw in the Edwardian heyday of the belle époque. Choice is still restricted to those with educated talents and long purses. What are our growth industries now? They are the offspring of fear. Private health insurance, private hospitals, burglar alarms, barbed wire, guard dogs, fortress architecture—these are the fruits of our profit and progress, as is the garbage that litters our streets.

I received through my letter box in Hampstead recently, along with the usual unsolicited garbage offering to buy my house, or sell me other people's houses, or provide me with private catering services or radio cars or handmade oil paintings of my child or my cat, an extraordinary missive. It offered assistance in the following areas: 'Divorce, Evidence collating, Debt Recovery, Personal Protection, Undercover
assignments, Investigation into Internal Thefts, Security. Advice on procedure (sic), Boarding up service (after break-in has occurred). Of course, I rang up the number (no name given) at once, in a helpful and friendly spirit, to point out that if this ingenious entrepreneur really wanted custom in Hampstead, he ought to learn how to spell. The entrepreneur was not best pleased to hear from me and told me where I could stuff his leaflet. But I held on to it with Hampstead tenacity, as a prime exhibit in the demonstration of the decline of quality of urban life. What has happened to us, that we produce such fly-blown by-products in the name of the service society?

We get what we deserve, perhaps. My daughter and a friend recently went to look at the estate where our Prime Minister has purchased her expensive retirement home, and she reported that it looked “deprived”. An odd word to choose, but brilliantly chosen, and I am sure we all know what she means. A mean style of architecture, defensive, pinched, guilty, with dogs and beggars and terrorists lining up at the gate. What beauty can be created in such conditions? I quote Shaw again: “We are a stupid people; and we are a bad-looking people. We are ugly; we have narrow minds; and we have bad manners. And a great deal of this is due to the effect of being brought up in a society of inequality”.

Utopia

I concede that the notion of equality of income is as Utopian as the notion of the career open to the talents. Shaw argued that a starting point would be a minimum wage, and that debate, as we know, continues. Opponents of all I have been saying would argue that an egalitarian society is doomed to be totalitarian, unmotivated, grey, drab, uncompetitive, economically inefficient—and I could say in reply that we cannot know this, for a truly egalitarian society has never been attempted. I would admit, perhaps, that some of the so-called socialist states of our century have set less than inspiring examples—but have the capitalists done much better? There are scarecrows of all colours, to left of us and to right of us. None of them can prevent us from trying to work out our own concepts of equality and justice.

Perhaps, at this point in the century, the sophisticated geometry and systems of checks and balances proposed by Rawls are more apposite than the pioneering polemics of Bernard Shaw, who preached socialism for decades and found his goal almost as distant at the end of his life as if he had never opened his mouth. We have seen too many versions of Year Zero, too many wars and disasters. Rawls at least offers a theory for a model of, some form of social justice and cohesion. Deeply though he is exercised by the notion of equality, he does not embrace total equality, only that degree of equality that is compatible with personal and political liberty and with the concept of a larger cake for all to share, with all receiving—albeit disproportionately—more, not less. Inequalities may be justified if the weakest and most disadvantaged members of society also profit from them. Inequalities in the educational system can be justified, for example, if, and only if, the allocation of more resources to the better endowed would improve the long-term expectations of the least favoured. In other words a smaller cake, equally shared, is not as good as a larger cake unequally shared. Some of this thinking has been hijacked by apologists for our present Government, but it has not been logically applied, for we do, I would maintain, live in a society in which the advantage of some depends directly on the disadvantage of others: we do not move forward together, some more slowly than others. Some are not at present moving forward at all, they are falling back.

To take the question of education as an illustration—it has long seemed to me that the existence of better resources in public schools than in inner-city schools is in no way connected with the improv-
ing of the long-term prospects of anybody other than the privileged recipients of that public school education, and that the new emphasis on parental choice prompts the question "Choice for whom?" Choice for the worse-off is at present actually diminishing. I am not arguing—and Rawls would presumably not argue—that we should have a uniform, unvaried, inflexible education system; merely that we should always take into account the effect of educational policy decisions on the least advantaged, on those least able, for a variety of reasons, to choose.

The notion of a free self-regulating market, of supply and demand, in education is absurd and leads to absurdities. It could, I suppose, be argued that if people are given the opportunity to convert their wealth into education for their children, they will work harder, the economy will prosper, and therefore by some mysterious process of natural redistribution everyone will get a better education. Personally, I simply can't see this happening—and neither I believe can anybody. One could call such an argument in favour of private education Utopian, or one could call it cynical. Sometimes there is only a hair's breadth between the two. It seems clear to me that we need to take such decisions on other principles altogether, and if we do not we will increasingly count the cost in terms of a divided and barricaded society. The schoolboy in his boater and the truant with his knife are bound together at present by no common social bond. They are natural enemies.

Imagination

Rawls' solutions appeal to me partly because they appeal to the imagination. Imagine, says Rawls, that we are all born—or created afresh, more plausibly—and are unaware of what position we shall hold in an as yet uncreated society. We are protected by a veil of ignorance from knowing what position we will occupy in that society. We do not know whether we will be black or white, male or female, fit or ill, religious or atheist, of low or high intellectual ability. We do not know whether our natural talents and social surroundings will fit us to be dustmen or playwrights, actors or politicians, neurosurgeons or waiters. What society would we then choose to create? What principles of distribution would we then espouse? Would we dare to risk for ourself and our dependents the gamble of assuming we would be born to advantage?

Rawls argues that we would not. He argues that we would be obliged to imagine the problems and handicaps of the most disadvantaged members of society, to conceive them as though they were (as they well might be) our own, and then to devise a system of distribution and a social structure that would protect the interests of those most disadvantaged. His reply is that we should and would base this society, given this original position, on the two principles I cited earlier—the principles of maximum liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others, and the arrangement of social and economic inequalities so that they may reasonably be expected to be to everyone's advantage, and are attached to, positions and offices open to all.

He does not extend his arguments imaginatively into the details of social administration and legislation that would spring from these first principles, for his concern as a moral philosopher is with the principles themselves. But we are at liberty to extend his thinking, to apply it for ourselves in concrete instances, to ask ourselves what would follow if we were to accept these first principles of justice. And it is obvious to me that many of the social evils we now consider acceptable or inevitable would be considered unacceptable and avoidable if we were truly to take that imaginative leap of looking at them from the position of the least advantaged.

For some reason—perhaps because I am a writer and imagination is my trade, perhaps because I am a woman, perhaps
because of my social background, perhaps because of my Quaker education—I find it much easier to identify downwards in the social scale than upwards. I find it all too easy to imagine losing all. I prepare myself for these losses. But alas, politicians and legislators and the electorate itself do not seem to have this propensity. Politicians identify upwards, it would seem, and they encourage us to identify upwards, even while passing legislation that is designed to prevent certain forms of upward mobility.

The Utopian dream of equality has turned into a dream of greed. Yes, says the Government, smiling, you can be rich too. And of course many have become rich, and are grateful to a Government that has made them so. But the price has been high, even for the rich themselves. Unlike many with whose views I am broadly in sympathy, I do not accuse this Government, this society, of wickedness. I accuse it of lack of imagination, of poverty of imagination. Our leaders at the present time cannot imagine a richer, more equal, more just and fairer world. They settle for less, for a world in which some get more equal justice, more equal pay, more health, more education, more three-piece suits, more houses than others. And in this equation, more for the many—and I admit that it is now the many, no longer as in Shaw’s day the very few—paradoxically does mean worse for us all.

Only a society which can imagine the plight of its weakest members, and legislates for their inclusion into society rather than their virtual expulsion from it, can call itself a just or equal society. I remain a renegade, with Shaw, in my view that some form of equality of income is a crucial component of socialism and of a just society, and could it be introduced as a visionary millenarian experiment in the year 2000 I would raise my glass of as yet unharvested champagne and drink to its success.

But failing that, let us more modestly pursue a Rawlsian programme, in which the advantage of the least advantaged is an essential consideration in any economic or political programme. I cannot believe that such a programme would destroy initiative, incentive, enterprise. I myself find it hard to believe that we are motivated only by a desire to have more than our neighbours, but if it is so, then our only hope of progress is to harness this competitive spirit for the good of all, and to put our inequalities to work.
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Case for equality

Seventy-five years ago, George Bernard Shaw spoke at the National Liberal Club on the ‘Case for Equality’. This pamphlet is the text of a recent speech examining the same theme given by Margaret Drabble to the Progressive League.

Her starting point is the theory of justice put forward by John Rawls, the American philosopher, which is based on two principles:

- a person should have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others;
- social and economic inequalities may reasonably be expected to be to everyone's advantage and attached to positions and offices open to all.

Although a society based on these principles would be much more equal, just and fairer than the present one, Margaret Drabble believes the Rawlsian theory does not go far enough. Britain is now so unjust and unequal that a new tyranny of fear has been created with social groups declaring unofficial war on other groups, and choice restricted to those with educated talents and long purses.

Recalling Bernard Shaw's argument, Margaret Drabble advocates an equality based not only on equality of opportunity but also on equality of income. She rejects the view that it would bring about uniformity and dullness; on the contrary, variety will be encouraged by the flourishing of more talents.

Margaret Drabble concludes that if her own vision of equality of income is Utopian, she would accept a society based on the Rawlsian programme in which the interest of the least advantaged is an essential consideration of any economic or political programme. If it is true that we are motivated only by a desire to have more than others, then our only hope of progress is to harness this competitive spirit for the good of all and to put inequalities to work.

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