

Fairness Is Child's Play in British Campaign

Gordon Brown and Nick Clegg are Aristotelians—unless there are more votes to be gained from Marxism.

By JAMIE WHYTE

The televised leaders' debates have propelled Nick Clegg and his Liberal Democratic Party up the popularity polls. They are now a close second to the Conservatives and may well be part of the next government. Yet most voters know little about the Liberal Democrats. What do they stand for? What kind of country do they want Britain to be?

The answer is written in big colorful letters on the cover of their manifesto: "Fair Taxes, a Fair Chance, a Fair Future, a Fair Deal." The LibDems, like Labour, seek "a future fair for all."

My six-year-old daughter will be delighted. Whenever she cannot stay up late or have another ice cream or otherwise get her way, she declares the situation "unfair." If the LibDems form a government, she will never again be disappointed.

No, that's not right. She is too young to understand what "fair" means. It does not mean having your way. It means ... Well, what does it mean? When Mr. Clegg or Gordon Brown promise to make Britain fair, what should we expect from them?

The answer is uncertain because the concept of "fair" is ambiguous. It is sometimes used to mean treating people equally. Call this the Aristotelian conception (for reasons you can guess). Yet it is sometimes used to mean treating people unequally so as to bring about an equal outcome. Call this the Marxist conception.



Getty Images

Income taxes illustrate the difference. A flat tax, whereby everyone pays the same rate regardless of his income, is fair on the Aristotelian conception. On the Marxist conception, progressive taxation—whereby higher earners pay higher tax rates—is fair. People are treated unequally so as to equalize their post-tax incomes.

When it comes to income tax, Messrs. Brown and Clegg are Marxists. The fair tax system they recommend is progressive.

But they are not always Marxists. A married man with five children whose wife stays at home will find it harder to make ends meet than a childless woman with the same job on the same pay. She will be better off than her male colleague. Eliminating such unequal outcomes is how employers used to justify paying men more than women: "to each according to his need, from each according to his ability," as Marx said.

But Messrs. Clegg and Brown would deem such practices unfair. They believe in equal pay for equal work. They are Aristotelian about fairness in the workplace.

Or are they? Imagine two people doing the same job and both earning £50,000 a year. While Jack has no other income, Jill also earns £50,000 from rental properties she inherited. Given the progressive taxes favored by Messrs. Clegg and Brown, all the income Jill earns from her job will be taxed at 40%, whereas Jack will pay only about 25%. Equal work, different pay.

Is it fair that referees apply the same rules to each team when the New Zealand All Blacks play Wales at rugby? Wales has not beaten the All Blacks since 1953. The Aristotelian is unmoved by this fact: Apply the rules blindly! Marxist fairness, by contrast, would require the referee to fiddle the rules so as to bring about a draw.

Messrs. Brown and Clegg are surely Aristotelian about fairness in sport. Everybody seems to be. But in other competitions they promote Marxism. They think it fair that the government imposes quotas on universities for the admission of applicants from state schools. This unequal treatment is aimed at giving state and independently educated pupils the same chance of winning admission.

Lost? Messrs. Brown and Clegg seem to be. They apparently apply the two inconsistent conceptions of fairness willy-nilly—Marxist one minute, Aristotelian the next. In fact, their incoherence is only intellectual. It makes perfect practical sense; they are Aristotelian unless there are more votes to be gained from Marxism.

Again, income tax illustrates the point. The fairness of flat taxes went without saying when the vote was restricted to men of financial means. With the advent of universal suffrage, however, politicians could win votes by promising to tax the wealthy few at a higher rate and transfer the money to the majority, who are taxed at a lower rate. It's only fair.

When it comes to rates of pay for men and women, however, the general historical trend of the Marxist conception supplanting the Aristotelian one has been reversed. It is easy to see why. Women did not get the vote until 1918. When only men vote, politicians will be inclined to call the unequal treatment of women fair, as indeed it is on the Marxist conception.

The electoral calculation does not lead all parties to the same view of fairness on every issue. University admissions are a good example. Few Labour supporters have children at independent schools. So applying lower standards to state school pupils will seem fair to Labour politicians. For Conservatives, with their traditional support-base, the fairness of this unequal treatment is less obvious.

On most issues, however, Conservatives face the same electoral calculations as Labour and the LibDems. So they have adopted not only the popular policies of unequal treatment, but also the Marxist conception of fairness that justifies them. They are now explicitly committed to "social justice," which is just another name for the Marxist conception of fairness.

So, as it turns out, my six-year-old daughter is right about fairness, at least as our politicians employ the concept. Something is fair if it suits you, and a majority of voters. Admittedly, she has not yet mastered this democratic qualification. But if she can, she may one day have a great political career passing off incoherent self-serving baloney as high-minded principle.

Mr. Whyte is a management consultant and author of *Crimes Against Logic* (McGraw Hill, 2004).