

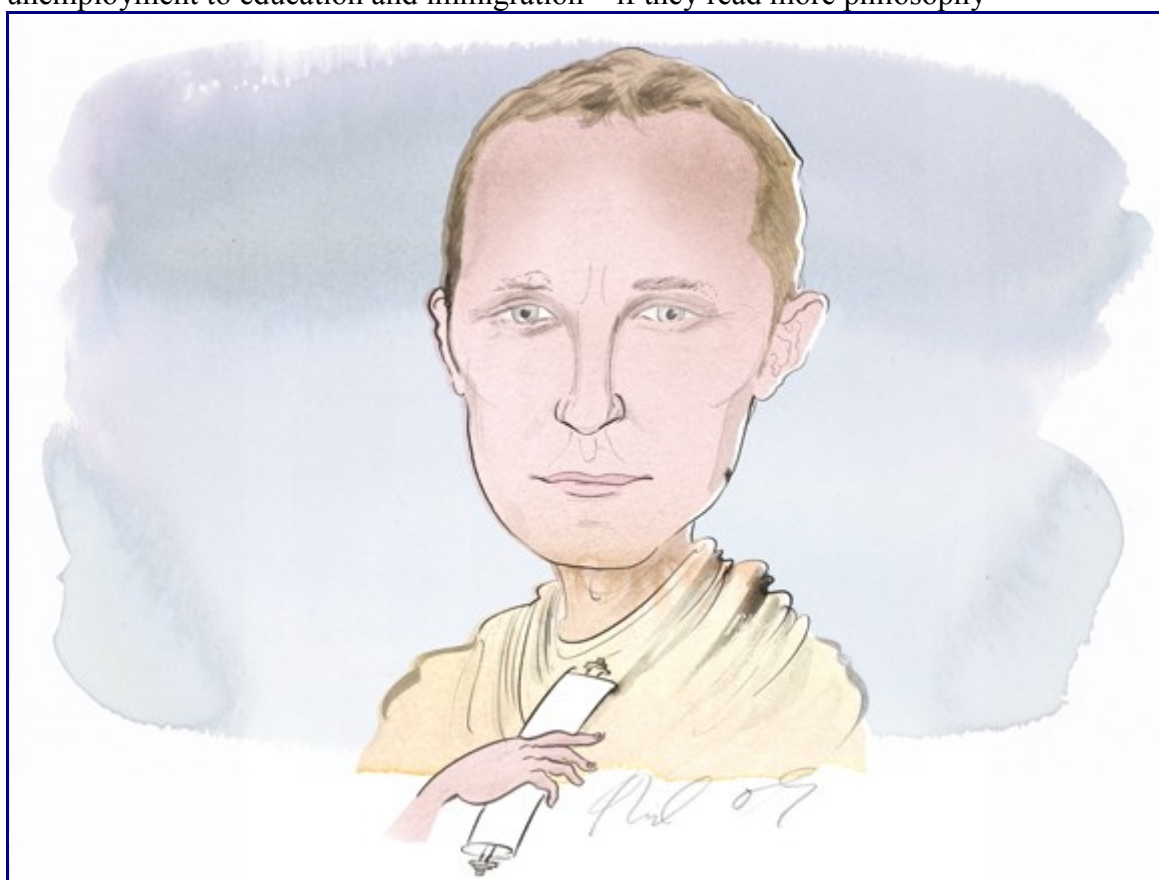
# Prospect

## Sen and Sensibility

[James Purnell](#)

[22nd September 2009](#) — [Issue 163](#)

Politicians would have a better chance of solving the great problems of the day—from unemployment to education and immigration—if they read more philosophy



The last year has been a surprisingly rich period for those seeking philosophical inspiration for political renewal. The BBC's Reith lectures were given by a philosopher, Harvard's Michael Sandel. Meanwhile economist and philosopher Amartya Sen has seen his ideas picked up on opposite sides of the political divide. Now both have written important new books—Sen's is called *The Idea of Justice*, (Allen Lane) Sandel's simply *Justice* (Allen Lane)—which argue that political philosophy has much to teach politicians. But does it? And should those who want to renew the centre-left start with philosophy first?

The argument the two philosophers make is braver than it first appears. As a former cabinet minister, I know all too well that philosophy and politics don't mix much. Governments have chief economists and chief medical officers, but not chief philosophers. Of course, philosophy is not an applied discipline, like economics or medicine. But many contemporary political problems, from the legitimacy of torture to affirmative action, are initially philosophical problems. This invites us to

think more deeply about the limited philosophical bent to our politics. As Sandel argues, political philosophy cannot “resolve disagreements once and for all. But it can give shape to the arguments we have, and bring moral clarity to the alternatives we confront.” The great debates in political theory over the past 40 years—between the liberal John Rawls, the libertarian Robert Nozick and communitarians such as Sandel himself—have followed the same furrows as our politics: income distribution, rights and responsibilities, identity and tolerance. But it’s as if the two professions have ploughed the same field while ignoring each other.

What if politicians can’t stomach the answers philosophers give? Politicians of my generation who studied Rawls at university may have questioned whether his ideas were palatable to voters. His argument that inequality should be tolerated only to the extent that it improves the income of the poorest appears fair but has radical implications, as does his principle that rewards aren’t justified by natural talents. Amartya Sen thinks politicians would be right to shy away from Rawls’s theories, as they do not sufficiently reward effort—something most people deem morally important. More widely, Sen believes that Rawls may have set himself an impossible task. Rawls uses a famous thought experiment called the “veil of ignorance,” in which he asks people to imagine the principles of justice they would agree to if they were ignorant of their own talents and circumstances. But Sen thinks that, even behind this veil, there will be inevitable disagreement. And even if we could agree it wouldn’t help us make the day-to-day political decisions about how to get to the ideal system. We don’t make decisions by comparing alternatives to an ideal, but by comparing them to each other.

Sen’s argument is a relief to those, like me, who found Rawls elegant but unreal. Sandel’s critique is a more familiar communitarian complaint, first outlined by Alasdair MacIntyre in *After Virtue* (1981) and by Sandel himself in *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (1982). The debate against Rawls these books kindled lasted two decades, becoming the most important in Anglo-Saxon political theory. Both accused Rawls of being too concerned with protecting political rights, and too neutral about what it means to lead a good life. Following Aristotle, Sandel thinks philosophy’s task isn’t just to build fair institutions, but to build a morally good society, too. But his view has its problems. He tries to show, for instance, that it is morally reasonable for us to have stronger attachments to our families and communities than to people we have never met. Yet families and communities can oppress us too, while the traditions of our society can be wrong (Aristotle defended slavery and infanticide). The idea of what constitutes living a “good life” also becomes more difficult as society becomes more diverse. Sandel supports gay marriage, on the grounds that marriage is about supporting loving relationships. But he would struggle to convince the religious fundamentalist for whom gay marriage offends their conception of the good life. The danger is that Sandel’s communitarianism could be used to defend a wide range of practices simply on the grounds that they are well rooted. And his epilogue on policy does not seem connected to the logic of his philosophy. His main argument could easily be used to support conservative positions on, for example, abortion, rather than the social democratic ideas of rebuilding the public realm or limiting markets that he suggests elsewhere. You can have liberals of both right and left of course—but the concept of community that he invokes is politically ambidextrous.

If Sandel is less good at helping the current centre-left work out what to think, Sen’s Idea of Justice is more promising. He thinks we don’t need a perfect theory of justice to compare a world where millions don’t get basic healthcare with one where they do, or a world where women have equal rights with one where they don’t. We may not be able to rank all the different options, but we can rank some of them, and as long as our decision is impartial and based on consideration of a range of views, that is objective enough. We could show Aristotle that infanticide is objectively wrong, as long as we understand objectivity as what reasonable people would agree on after a process of impartial scrutiny. Of course, that doesn’t mean that all our moral views are objective, or that all debates can be resolved. As Bernard Williams says: “Disagreement does not necessarily have to be overcome.”

Such a conclusion has wide-reaching political implications. It suggests instead that politicians need not have a policy for everything and—radically—that government need not be unified on every

issue. Where one answer cannot be found—either intellectually, or because no solution commands consensus—it may be because it simply doesn't exist. Sometimes the government should let people decide: instead of imposing answers from the top, they should work harder to let citizens devise their own answers from the bottom. This philosophical bias may be especially useful at a time of public spending restraint, suggesting that wise governments should increase spending on areas where there is agreement about their public value, such as education, and reduce it in contested areas such as industrial subsidies, leaving companies and individuals to make their own decisions with their money.

\*\*\*

But does all this help political parties like my own renew their ideas? I believe it can. Clarifying the theory which lies behind our instincts and traditions helps us both to avoid dead ends and to decide the most promising paths on which to embark. In particular, it suggests that centre-left parties must develop a more ambitious idea of equality. Rather than focusing on equality of income or utility, we should think about what Sen calls people's capabilities: their effective freedom to achieve the goals they choose. This is not a way of forgetting about inequality of income, but of enlarging equality beyond questions of income alone. As Sen said in his previous great work, *Development as Freedom* (1999) "the problem of inequality in fact gets magnified as the attention is shifted from income inequality to the inequality in the distribution of substantive freedoms and capabilities." So, a party drawing inspiration from Sen's ideas might narrow the scope of its activities in some areas, but deepen its ambition in others—especially those where people's capabilities are weak. For example, evidence suggests that government intervention makes the biggest difference to children in their first years—yet public spending remains greater when children are older. Adopting a capabilities approach would suggest tipping this on its head: spending more on early years, but expecting more from parents in later ones. It would mean helping parents spend more time with their young children, while bearing in mind that having no adult in work in a household damages the capabilities of child and parent alike; it would also require tougher measures to encourage quick returns to employment.

Political theory may be more helpful in clarifying what we think than what we say. Political philosophers aren't copy writers. The well-worn philosophical distinction between types of freedom—freedom from and freedom to, or positive and negative freedom—translates badly into the language of television debate. Nor is "inequality of capability" a snappy slogan. Centre-left politicians should instead try talking about freedom and power: the freedom to choose our way of life, and the power to achieve it. And they should listen to Sen's emphasis on the role of democracy as a form of public discussion. These three ideas—freedom, power and democracy—are a starting point for renewal of the centre-left. Another is Sen's belief that we should concentrate on "redressable injustices." This directs us towards inequalities of power rather than restrictions of freedom. Labour has been more liberal on social issues than our reputation suggests. Pubs close later, gay couples can enter civil partnerships and adopt, immigration is relatively open and institutional racism has been tackled. But the extremity of views about our record—between those who think the Human Rights Act a liberal folly, and those who think our crime and terrorism policies deeply illiberal—is striking. As a social liberal I want to see freedom extended. But, more importantly, Britain's stark inequalities of power demand our attention.

Focusing on this starts with economic power. The credit crunch has opened economics up for debate. For the moment this has mainly focussed on reforming financial markets but, as the world comes out of recession, the debate will move on to what kind of economy we want to have. This should be a progressive economic moment. At the G20 summit in April, the world's leaders came together to use regulation and borrowing to correct the failings of markets. Yet progressive economics is not winning the argument, especially in Europe. Voters aren't convinced that these policies can protect them, having seen two decades in which politicians of the left praised globalisation while ignoring the insecurity that it causes. Our slogan was "we can't protect your existing job, but we can help you find the next one." The danger is that people now think the first

part is true, not the second.

Renewing social democracy, then, means first convincing voters that the welfare state can protect them. For me that means guaranteeing people a job within a certain period of time—as Labour is doing for young people (see Fran Abrams, p56)—rather than making the labour market less flexible. As the economy recovers, the guarantee for the young should be extended to all ages. This would also be a better answer to public concerns about migration than increasing immigration controls which, given our EU membership, would have only a marginal impact in any case. It would be a better answer to the threat of the BNP, too. As YouGov pollster Peter Kellner's research indicates, insecurity, rather than prejudice, is the biggest reason people vote for the far right.

Second, we need to give more power to individuals to achieve their goals. This means sticking to our belief that ending child poverty requires redistribution, not just tackling isolated social problems such as family breakdown as the right tends to imagine. It also means that education should be the first spending priority of any government, and suggests a different approach to delivery than the centralised one with which the left has traditionally felt comfortable. If people have different goals and face different obstacles, then they will likely need different kinds of education. People are experts in their own lives. A focus on power and capability, therefore, means a more deregulated supply of education, but one with more resources going to the poorest.

Third, we should prioritise issues of cultural power. For utilitarians, culture often seems irrelevant and not the province of government. But for individuals to be able to make decisions, they need access to knowledge, and the ability to scrutinise others' opinions and form their own. This makes everything from a thriving mass media to a vibrant theatre a progressive concern.

At present, political debates revolve around the downside of our freedoms, from binge drinking to environmentally unsustainable behaviour. But rather than reducing freedom, such problems are best solved by empowering people to use their freedom more sensibly. In this way (and although derided by some) the government's attempt to help schoolchildren become more emotionally resilient, and provide parenting classes are surely correct.

Perhaps the most important contribution of Sen's new book, however, is his call for a more ambitious concept of democracy. New Labour had a blind spot about the more deliberative aspects of democratic reform. We didn't move on after delivering the more traditional constitutional proposals in our 1997 manifesto, such as devolution. But the idea of democracy as public discussion is rich policy soil. Deliberative mechanisms—allowing the public to discuss and contribute to policy decisions—can help overcome precisely the sort of vested interests that progressive politics must take on, and also make it harder for the clock to be turned back by our opponents. So Labour should widen the range of voices in our politics by allowing open primaries to select parliamentary candidates. We should push for more plural sources of legislation, by allowing parliament itself to initiate new laws. The electoral system should be reformed so that everyone's vote counts, and the Lords should be wholly elected. Political donations should be strictly limited, so that inequalities of economic power don't translate into inequalities of democratic power. Most importantly, the state must reduce its role in certain policy areas, and instead create new mechanisms where individuals and communities can come together to make common decisions. Isolated examples exist already: citizen panels deciding how to spend money on improving neighbourhoods; communities coming together to think about local power generation; or the role of governors in schools or elected representatives in foundation hospitals. But these experiments would become much more widespread if national government moved towards the narrower, deeper scope I suggest. Ultimately, Sen is right to conclude that governments should do less in some areas, and devote more resources to redressable injustices and creating capable people in others. His case that political philosophers have much to teach politicians is a convincing one—even if governments are unlikely to appoint chief philosophers any time soon.