Re-imagining politics to build a fairer society: Q&A with Daniel Chandler

*For **Daniel Chandler**, some key insights into reforming our politics to make it more inclusive, egalitarian and democratic come from the philosopher John Rawls. In his latest book* [Free and Equal: What Would a Fair Society Look Like](#)*, Chandler draws on Rawls's thinking to put forward practical ideas to reform our current model, to restore trust, boost meaningful political participation, and overcome divisive identity politics. These include capping financial donations to political parties, mandating greater transparency in lobbying, making voter registration easier, banning second jobs for MPs, and holding elections outside of working days. Beyond these, he also advocates more radical democratic innovations, some with the potential to profoundly reshape our political institutions and processes.*

Daniel Chandler will be speaking at the LSE Festival event "[What Would a Fairer Society Look Like?](#)" on Saturday 17 June 2023.

One of your proposals to make UK politics more democratic is a shift from First Past the Post to Proportional Representation (PR). Why would a move towards PR be a positive step?

I think it's important to recognise just how unhappy people are with politics in the UK right now – just 17 per cent [indicate](#) that they are highly satisfied with our political system

(on a par with Russia!) while [more than half](#) think our democracy needs major change, or a complete overhaul. And our "first past the post" voting system is a key part of the problem. People living in safe seats are routinely ignored, and those voting for smaller parties feel their votes are wasted.

Proportional voting would ensure that everyone's vote counts, and that votes are translated directly into seats. Popular support for changing the voting system is actually [higher](#) than ever. The British Social Attitudes Survey has tracked views about PR since the early 1980s, and in 2021 more than half of the population were in favour of reform for the first time. Support is even stronger among "progressives" – 61 per cent among Labour supporters, and 69 per cent mong Lib Dems, and in fact Labour Party members voted to adopt the policy at their 2022 party conference.

Despite this support, opposition leader Keir Starmer has refused to make any commitments to such a change. To what do you put down this resistance?

You're right that Keir Starmer has refused to back the idea (though he hasn't ruled it out). I think this partly reflects a wider cautiousness within the Labour Party about big reforms, and a desire to focus on other issues like climate and the economy. I also think there is a natural tendency for dominant parties to want to hang on to a system that gives them a huge amount of power if they win a majority, as long as that seems like a realistic prospect which it clearly does for Labour right now.

You've argued that initiatives to maximise direct and deliberative democracy can help reinvigorate politics, such as random selection which has a long history and has been effectively used to drive change in recent years in places such as Ireland, through citizens' assemblies. How do you view its potential in the UK context?

While elections must have a central role in any large-scale democracy, this model has its limitations: there is always a risk that elected representatives will become detached from the wider population, as they arguably have today.

The appeal of random selection is that it offers a very direct way to achieve the democratic ideal of political equality, since by design everyone has an equal chance of taking part. It also offers us an insight not just into what people think here and now (which we can get from opinion polls), but what a representative sample of the population *would* think if they had time to look at the evidence and to discuss it with

people who might hold different views.

That said, I don't think random selection is viable as a wholesale alternative to electoral democracy. Everyone should have a say over the laws we have to live by, whether via their elected representatives or though referendums, and without these opportunities to participate people would become disengaged from politics.

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The challenge now is to take this method from the fringes and integrate it into our political system. This could be on an issue-by-issue basis, and the case for random selection is especially strong when it comes to the design of the political system itself, otherwise those in power will be tempted to design the rules of politics to advance their own partisan interests. So we could [delegate](#) the question of electoral reform discussed above to a Citizens' Assembly, for example. Or we could look to replace the House of Lords with a second chamber selected in this way, with similar powers to advise and scrutinise legislation, though final decisions would still be made by the House of Commons.

As well as capping private donations you make the case for "democracy vouchers", where citizens would be given an equal sum of money per year or election cycle to give to the party of their choice. Why do you think that's necessary?

The role of private money in politics is maybe the most egregious problem with democracy as we know it. Recent [research](#) from Warwick University found that in 2019, nearly half of all donations to political parties in the UK came from just 104 "super-donors", giving an average of £442,000 each. This system gives disproportionate influence to a small and deeply unrepresentative donor class.

If we are serious about political equality, we need to cap private donations. But political parties still need money – to organise campaigns, to do research and develop new ideas. "Democracy vouchers" would put public funding in the hands of citizens. Rather than having to go cap in hand to rich donors, parties would have to appeal to everyone. And we know this can work: since 2017, residents of Seattle have received four $25

vouchers which they can give to City Council candidates, leading more people to [contribute](#) to political parties (using their vouchers), especially those from under-represented groups, and more competitive elections. In *Free and Equal* I also propose extending a similar system to funding public interest news media, to tackle the excessive influence of super-rich media tycoons like Rupert Murdoch.

Daniel Chandler discusses Rawls's philosophical ideas in this LSE Festival short. [Click here](#) to watch on LSE Player.

A central principle in Rawls's thinking is equality of opportunity, and of course education plays a key role in that. What do you see as the most urgent policy shifts needed in in this area?

I think the most urgent priority is to expand high quality early years education. Pound for pound, investing in early years education makes the biggest difference to children's future life chances, and yet we still spend much more per child on schools and universities. The decision earlier this year to extend free childcare to children from nine months is a big step in the right direction, though it only applies to children with working parents, which means many from the poorest households who would benefit the most will be left out.

We also need to do more to target school funding towards disadvantaged children – unfortunately the trend in recent years has been in the opposite direction. And we need to tackle the role of fee-paying schools. About 7 per cent of children go to a private school, but this group go on to dominate the upper echelons of most elite professions, accounting for two third of senior judges, nearly half of politicians and newspaper columnists, and nearly a third of business leaders. At the very least we should remove their charitable status, and I argue that we should abolish them entirely, as Finland did in the 1970s. We need to distinguish between the parental freedoms that really matter and which are essential for family life – like being free to read to your children, and introduce them to friends – from those like spending money on private education which just don't have the same importance.

Evidence shows that inequality makes us all worse off in terms of our security, health, happiness, and well-being. Yet some defend inequality as a necessary feature of a neoliberal system. How can we get beyond this impasse?

We need to tackle the moral and ideological justifications for inequality put forward by proponents of neoliberalism head on. While many people recognise that inequality is too high, we have struggled to articulate a coherent and compelling alternative, and this is where Rawls's philosophy comes into its own.

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Rawls recognises that a degree of inequality can be justified, but only if this ultimately benefits everyone – say by providing incentives to work, study or innovate. In particular, he argues that we should organise our economy so that the least well off are better off than they would be under any alternative. Moreover, Rawls is clear that economic justice isn't only about money, but about the balance of power within firms, and about how our society shapes the opportunities people have for self-respect and social recognition.

This idea provides the basis for an ideal of shared prosperity that is both distinctively liberal and strongly egalitarian – an alternative to the idea of "equality at any cost" sometimes associated with socialism, and the focus on maximising economic growth without caring about how this is distributed which has dominated economic policy in

recent decades.

You've said we find ourselves at a particular moment in history in which a transformative agenda could find real resonance – why is that?

I think we are living in one of those rare moments in history where the ideas that have dominated our political discourse for decades – roughly, the "neoliberal" ideas that came to prominence in the 1980s, and which were underpinned by thinkers like Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman – have run their course, and there is a popular appetite for something new. But seizing this opportunity will require moral and political leadership, rather than a politics of triangulation where political parties simply seek to strike a balance based on the latest opinion polling.

Progressive parties in particular need to regain a sense of political agency – their ability to shape people's political beliefs and identities – something Thatcher and Regan understood all too well. In the absence of such leadership, the pressure for change will have to come from citizens – from social movements and civil society, as has so often been the case throughout history. In the end, big and lasting change only happens when the people demand it.

You can watch Daniel Chandler discussing these ideas further in [this recording](#) of the LSE Festival 2023 event "What would a fairer society look like?"