

An exploration of justice with Michael Sandel

Friday 13 June 2014 chez McCarthy

Before seeing the one-hour programme from BBC Four, the 15 people present were asked to consider three questions:

1. Should we allow democracy's emphasis on short-term interests to ignore the long-term interests of future generations?
2. Should we restrict civil liberties so that long-term concerns can be addressed?
3. Should people who are forced to move by climate change have an automatic right to settle in another country?

The group then watched Professor Sandel's lively exposition of the political philosophies of Jeremy Bentham (utility), Immanuel Kant (human dignity) and Aristotle (the good life).

The ensuing discussion began with Bentham's insistence on giving precedence to the benefit of the greatest number. This appeared to endorse our Western insistence on democracy (the majority interest) and economics (placing a price on everything). But elections don't give the vote to future generations, and some things (rainforests; happiness) can't be priced.

This raised the question of how you choose the experts to take the far-sighted and complex decisions involved. Perhaps benevolent despots (as in Oman) had a greater chance than democracies of focusing on the right choices. Aristotle evidently preferred aristocrats ('best rulers') to idiots ('private individuals'). But the experience of power tended to change their priorities. The population explosion suggested that other ways of looking at the world (China; India) might be more appropriate.

If, to take a broader view, survival of the species is the driving principle behind our choices, how effective can the instinct for self-preservation be, when the world's enormous population is so incompatible with its finite resources? The answer, perhaps, was through education and the consequent pressure of public opinion on the politicians. Some evidence of this was evident in movements like the London Citizens, which set up lobby groups to address failures of social justice; such movements then bred experts with the competence to tackle complex issues. There were also signs of greater public awareness, more particularly among younger people, where car ownership was giving way to car sharing schemes, waste disposal was becoming more ecological, and the Green vote was continuing its unspectacular but steady rise.

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