



**CO-OPERATIVES UK**

NEW INSIGHT 2

## The Co-operative Barometer

How fair is Britain?

*Ed Mayo*

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## The Co-operative Barometer: how fair is Britain?

There has perhaps never been a time when fairness was so central to mainstream political rhetoric (that “we are all in this together”), so central to political and economic theory (most recently, with Amartya Sen’s *The Idea of Justice*) and yet, on all standard accounts of inequality, so absent in economic reality.

Fairness has been a subject of active debate in contemporary moral philosophy and political theory, ever since the publication in 1971 of John Rawls’ *A Theory of Justice*. In turn, Rawls’ work is located in a long tradition of defining fairness as turning on what an impartial observer would say (or, in the form of a social contract, what people would say if they came together in an impartial setting). The idea of judgement at a distance unites most modern theories of fairness.

**Fairness encourages us to be co-operative in the expectation that others will be too.**

A different approach is to start close up and take an empirical view as to what people think and how they behave in relation to fairness. The pioneers of this approach include the great co-operative theorists of our day – Herbert Gintis, Samuel Bowles, Ernest Fehr, Elinor Ostrom and Johnston Birchall – in a renewal of contemporary research and thinking that is putting human behaviour and social norms of co-operation at the heart of social and economic thinking.

Fairness emerges as a key factor that encourages us to be co-operative in the expectation that others will be too.

If you think that fairness is just motherhood and apple pie, try dividing up the pie unequally between children and watch what happens. We care about fairness and we also have an instinctive, though not always consistent or universal, sense of what is fair or unfair.

In asking the people of Britain how fair they feel we are as a nation, we are helping to fill a gap. There has been valuable work in recent years by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation on public perceptions of economic inequality. There is also no shortage of academic research on the facts of poverty, most recently the excellent *State of the Nation* published by the Cabinet Office for the Coalition Government. But there has been nothing as yet, to our knowledge, which offers a systematic view of how fair the public believes the UK to be in a form that could become a regular indicator of progress, as recognised as orthodox measures of consumer confidence, bank lending and house prices. If co-operation is key to quality of life, innovation and long-run economic performance, then this is a measure that counts.

## Method and definitions

The research was conducted by George Street Research for Co-operatives UK via an online survey across a sample of 1,052 adults across the UK in May 2010.

The Co-operative Barometer is a high level indicator representing the extent to which everyone has a chance to get on divided by the extent to which they fail to help people in need. This is an indicative indicator, intended to capture key elements of fairness in a resonant way. It represents, in shorthand, equal opportunities divided by social solidarity. It has added value in that in order for this indicator to rise or fall, many other elements of fairness are brought into play.

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We have chosen the term 'barometer' to reflect its traditional function of helping to make sense of what is around us, in terms of the weather. Barometers also point to the extent to which our context is one that is set "fair", "change", "stormy" or "dry".

The Green Co-operative Barometer adjusts this headline indicator for the extent to which we look after the environment. There is increasing recognition of the interplay between fairness and environmental damage, including the distribution of pollution and habitat loss, debate around the moral claims of other species and issues around the accounting for the quality of environmental resources and functions across different generations.

The UK Fairness Trends represent a wider array of indicators, each capturing different elements of what in the academic literature can be picked out as elements of fairness. These indicators, in this first study, set a baseline for future comparison.

### DEFINITION

**Co-operative Barometer** – the extent to which society allows everyone a chance to get on in life divided by degree to which people in society fail to help those in need.

## Findings

### The Co-operative Barometer

The leading indicator on fairness in the UK stands at 14 in 2010, where the most fair situation possible would rate as 100 and the most unfair would rate as zero.<sup>1</sup> The UK therefore emerges as a nation characterised by very considerable unfairness.

The majority of people believe that, on balance, equal opportunity is not open to all. However, around one third of people (32%) take a more positive view, believing that everyone has an equal chance to get on in life. The most positive people are those, interestingly, that have their life in front of them – students, which may suggest that times will change or that their optimism may be dented by the realities of access to opportunity in Britain today. While students are the only group in the UK that believe that there are equal opportunities for all, people who are retired also emerge as more positive than adults of working age.

In terms of the nations of the UK, while the overall judgement is negative on the state of equal opportunities, the English are more likely than others to agree that there are equal opportunities, followed by Wales and then Scotland.

When it comes to supporting vulnerable people, one of the defining characteristics of a fair society, the view again, on balance, is negative – that we don't do our bit to help people in need. Only one in four people (25%) say that we do. The only region across the UK that this is not true for, with a more positive view of solidarity, is the North East of England.

**The UK emerges as a nation characterised by very considerable unfairness.**

People who are unemployed appear to feel the lack of support very directly – far from being grateful, their perception is that help does not tend to come for those in need. Students too share this sense of living in a less caring world. People who feel more involved in their community are also more likely to feel good about their community, in terms of helping those who are vulnerable, but even so their overall view remains negative.

In our recent research on neighbourliness, Co-operative Streets, we also found that over time, the proportion of people who keep an eye on people who may be in need locally has remained stable since 1980 (and indeed increased when it is relatives involved), suggesting that, on that measure at least of local reciprocity, the UK is not getting any worse.

On both dimensions of fairness, women and men emerge as having similar perceptions of the world around them.<sup>2</sup>

Across different parts of the UK, there is a Celtic feeling of unfairness. It is not just politics that is devolved but a sense of injustice – Wales in particular scores low on many counts. Only one in ten people in Wales (11%) feels that businesses, for example, treat them fairly as customers, compared to one in four in London (28%) and the South West (25%) – with similar results for how people feel treated as employees. Only 2% of people in Wales agree that the information people receive is open and honest, compared to close to one in four people (23%) in London. 75% of people in Wales believe that they face some form of discrimination. In Scotland, one in four people (24%) feel that they have equal opportunities compared to two out of five (38%) in the South East, with low scores too in Scotland for the openness and honesty of information.

<b>Co-operative Barometer – regional ranking</b> (1 – most fair, 8 – least fair)			
South East	1	London	5
North East	2	South West	6
Midlands	3	Scotland	7
North West	4	Wales	8

### **The Green Co-operative Barometer**

Over a third of people (35%) are neutral as to whether we look after the environment. However, of the balance, more people are negative (38%) on this aspect of fairness – the claims of sustainability – than are positive.

Adjusting for this element, what emerges in terms of the Green Co-operative Barometer is a score that is lower still – at 13 out of a possible total of 100.

### **The UK Fairness Trends**

The indicators above are intended to exemplify overall perceptions of fairness, rather than give a comprehensive account. It is not only political theorists and academics that have different ideas on fairness, but the public itself. Different groups of people will place their emphasis on different aspects of fairness and may view the same episodes in entirely different ways.

We found a relatively wide polarisation of views if you take a very broad question as to how fair UK society is as a whole. Across the survey sample of 1,052 adults in the UK, 36% rate UK society as fair (3% 'very fair' and 33% 'quite fair'), 36% rate UK society as unfair (8% 'very unfair' and 28% 'quite unfair') and 25% think

it is neither fair nor unfair. We also asked survey participants what aspects of society they would like to be fairer. The comments included:

*“any sort of discrimination whether it be race, religion or gender”*

*“reducing the amount of fat cat salaries”*

*“everyone being entitled to have a view”*

*“quality of life”*

*“caring for the old, infirm and disadvantaged. Not just the ones who know how to work the system.”*

*“distribution of wealth”*

*“more consideration for the environment so we all have the right to live with clean air and uncongested roads.”*

*“everyone, young or old, able bodied or not able bodied and regardless of skin colour or religious beliefs being treated the same and having the same standard of living.”*

There is a strong tradition in the UK of fair play – of decency, and the right to challenge something that is ‘not cricket’. Some people claim that it is easier for people to agree what is in fact not cricket, than what is fair. It is notable, for example, that consumer protection regulations in the UK and across the EU have recently moved towards a principle not of trading ‘fairly’, but of ‘not trading unfairly’. The negative helps to define the positive.

**Humanity may have evolved a moral capacity for understanding fairness.**

As Geoff Mulgan argues in a separate think piece we have published recently on learning to co-operate, children very quickly learn to observe, and also police, the world around them through the lens of what is fair and unfair. Marc Hauser argues, further, that humanity may have evolved a moral capacity for understanding fairness that is akin to the natural capability we have, following Noam Chomsky, for learning grammar and language.

The great faiths, a bedrock of our culture, also all talk about fairness, in different ways:

- The early Christian church father, Basil the Great, said, for example, “When a man strips another of his clothes, he is called a thief. Should not a man who has power to clothe the naked man but does not do be called the same? That bread which you keep belongs to the hungry; that coat which you preserve in your wardrobe belongs to the naked; those shoes which are rotting in your

possession belong to the shoeless; that gold which you have hidden in the ground belongs to the needy. There, as often as you were able to help others and refused, so often you did them wrong.”

- A constant principle of Jewish law is that a justifiable end may never be achieved through unjustified means. So the Talmud states that the first question that will be asked of those who enter the world to come is ‘were you honest in business?’
- Islam has a range of propositions on how economic life should be ordered in order to be fair, from the banning of usury to the practice of Zakat, a cross between taxation and charity.
- In the Hindu tradition, in the words of the Isa Upanishad “this world is the home of God”, so one principle is not to take more than you need.<sup>3</sup>
- Similarly, generosity is probably the pre-eminent Buddhist virtue, stressing a spontaneous expression of selfless, impartial concern for the well-being of others.

**Some claim that the ‘golden rule’ is as close as humanity gets to a single, cultural, moral imperative of fair behaviour.**

Some claim that the ‘golden rule’ is as close as humanity gets to a single, cultural, moral imperative of fair behaviour, crossing all these great faith traditions.

This is the age old reciprocity of “I will if you will”, a bedrock of being willing to co-operate by treating others as you would want them to treat you. But if the golden rule is the yardstick of fairness in the UK, we are falling far short. Over two thirds of people in the UK, in our survey, say that people don’t behave towards others in the way that they would want to be treated (68%; 18% ‘agree strongly’, 50% ‘tend to agree’). Golden rule, tarnished Britain.

Fairness and unfairness is not just about what government does. It is certainly the case that government is trusted less than society. But our research suggests that society is not seen as a panacea. 61% of people across the UK feel that the way government treats people is unfair. 44% feel that the way people are treated in society is unfair. That is a big improvement, but it is hardly a ringing endorsement. Embracing the ‘Big Society’ does not solve issues of fairness and for a minority, it is like jumping from the fire back into the frying pan. Clearly, issues of fairness, such as open information and having a say, matter no less in a Big Society than they do with a Big Government.

The UK Fairness Trends are designed to track a range of different dimensions of fairness and unfairness, on the grounds that what matters to one may not matter to all. This data can be expanded or adapted over time and lead to different

headline barometers and different results, depending on your starting point. A democratic approach to understanding fairness, following John Dewey, needs open and public deliberation. It requires us to reflect on and talk about what is fair and what is not.

UK Fairness Trends 2010 (%) <sup>4</sup>							
Theme	Statements about the UK	Agree strongly	Tend to agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Tend to disagree	Disagree strongly	Don't know/no response
Voice	People have a say over things that affect them	6	30	27	28	7	1
Access	The information we get is open and honest	2	11	31	37	16	2
Discrimination	You don't face discrimination in today's world	3	8	24	35	27	2
Society	The way that people are treated in society is fair	2	18	33	36	8	3
Business	The way that businesses treat their customers is fair	1	18	38	32	8	3
Work	The way that businesses treat their employees is fair	1	19	43	25	7	4
Economy	The distribution of UK wealth is fair	2	8	20	35	33	3
State	The way that the government treats people is fair	1	10	24	35	26	3



## Conclusion

The Coalition Government has stressed that, while it has tough choices, it aims to be fair. But it is perhaps a paradox that, even as politicians compete for the mantle of fairness and the academics pile up evidence on the true costs of inequality within and across nations, life itself doesn't seem to be getting any fairer.

Some might say that the concept of fairness is at odds with the complexity and apparent ungovernable dynamics of modern, open economies – there is little we can do and if there is unfairness, perhaps it will work out in the long run.

Co-operatives start from a different understanding and one that increasingly chimes with new research and evidence on human behaviour and social connectedness.<sup>5</sup> We can make a difference. Fairness is about habits, as much as it is about dreams. It is about everyday life, as much as what someone in government (someone else) should do. In rather more dry, theoretical terms, it is about social norms of co-operation and reciprocity.

The truth must be that we are all more likely to co-operate if we believe others will behave fairly – and we are more likely to believe others will be fair to us, if we have collaborated with them before.

Fairness, therefore, is the shadow of the future. Given the findings we report here, we would do well to take care.

THE AUTHOR

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## Notes

- 1 The two questions asked are the extent of agreement with the statements "Everyone today has an equal chance to get on in life" and "We don't do our bit to help people in need." A five scale response is used: agree strongly, tend to agree, neither agree nor disagree, tend to disagree, disagree strongly.

For the construction of the index, points are allocated, from five for 'agree strongly' to one for 'disagree strongly' with the mean calculated from the results. The maximum on the equation of the two results, where one is divided by the other is five, the minimum is 0.2. For clarity, this is reordered, from zero to 4.8 and using a factor of 20.83 to produce a scale running from zero to one hundred.

The scale itself is less important than how the Barometer moves over time. To achieve 100 is, perhaps, a utopian goal, as it requires strong and universal agreement on equality of opportunities and support for people in need in society. The Barometer is therefore, as it should be, a demanding measure that compares the current state with an ideal of fairness.

I would like to thank John Sandford of KPMG for assistance in the construction of this measure.

- 2 A footnote, however, on this is that people who are members of co-operatives tend to be more likely than others to feel good about the state of equal opportunities across the country and more likely to feel that there is help for those in need.
- 3 Ghandi, famously, wrote "it is a fundamental law of nature that nature produces enough for our wants from day to day: and if only everybody took enough for their own needs and nothing more, there would be no poverty in this world."
- 4 Not all rows sum to 100, because of rounding up or down the numbers.
- 5 Co-operatives themselves, in the same research survey, are associated with being fair by the majority of people (75%, compared to 18% who associate PLCs with fairness).

## Co-operatives UK

Co-operatives UK works to promote, develop and unite co-operative enterprises. It has a unique role as a trade association for co-operatives and its campaigns for co-operation, such as Co-operatives Fortnight, bring together all those with a passion and interest in co-operative action.

Any organisation supportive of co-operation and mutuality can join and there are many opportunities online for individuals to connect to the latest co-operative news, innovations and campaigns. All members benefit from specialist services and the chance to network with other co-operatives.

[www.uk.coop](http://www.uk.coop)

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Co-operative Society.

How fair is Britain? In this *New Insight*, Ed Mayo uses a brand new indicator of fairness, the Co-operative Barometer, to measure how fair the public believes the UK to be. In addition to reporting the sobering results of the first barometer, he explains why fairness and co-operation are so important for society.



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