

Life's not fair: the public's perception of cuts is what matters in the end

Charlie Beckett discusses the public's perception of this week's cuts announcement, and offers some advice to Cameron and Clegg.

The idea of fairness has suddenly become the central concept in British politics. The Big Question at the moment is whether the Coalition's cuts are being shared equally amongst us all.

The debate reveals a lot about the difficulty of having a 'rational' political discussion in today's frantically over-managed political media world.

Of course, the cuts are not fair. Life's not fair. If you are on, say £15,000 then a cut of 10% will be much more painful than someone on say £50,000 who loses 15%. Statistically, the richer person is sacrificing more, but in the real world, the poorer person has less leeway.

One person has to give up their only annual £500 holiday, the other has to give up their £2,000 second holiday - who suffers most?

Enormous Grief

That is why the Coalition government is going to get enormous grief from the mass of the electorate over the next few years. Of course, the British public may well admire their toughness. And if George's Gamble works then the credit they will eventually get will be all the greater. May. If.

In the end the figures don't matter. Perhaps the [IFS are right to say that cuts in welfare and in public spending will hit the poorest hardest](#). But the statistics are too complex for even experts to say anything with certainty. And it's missing the point.

In the end it's how the public perceive the cuts personally. Even if they lose services and income they may feel pride in a government prepared to do the Right Thing and cleanse the Augean stables of the UK public sector, clearing the sclerotic bureaucracy grown fat under New Labour.

Or they may feel hurt, fear and deprivation.

Stop Soft Soap

I would advise Cameron and Clegg to stop attempting to soft soap the public about how 'fair' the cuts are. They simply aren't in the wider, real sense of who feels most pain. All that stuff about We're In It All Together simply grates when it emerges from such elegantly educated lips with such comfortable backgrounds. Better to concentrate on the longer term self-interest of putting Britain's finances back on track.

Funnily enough, it is Ed Miliband that has an intriguing problem here. The easy meat is for him to become the Victim's Friend and Scaremonger General. But if he does that he will end up looking like a very one-dimensional, uninspirational politician. What is his alternative? higher taxes? levies on banker's bonuses? More borrowing?

[The Guardian's Jonathan Freedland](#) has suggested one way for Labour to rescue its reputation. He suggests that they tell the public how the deficit was created to save the economy. Cue grateful applause? Hmm... I suspect ITV's [Tom Bradby's Titanic metaphor](#) is closer to the realities of contemporary politics. He suggests that Labour admits that a) it was at the helm when we hit the iceberg and b) the ship was not as well prepared as it should have been. As I said earlier in this piece, Life's Not Fair.

Retrench Warfare

We are in for at least a couple of years of grim (re-)trench warfare as the re-ordering of the UK's public sector proceeds. The politicians and journalists are going to be wading up to their waists through the mud and blood of this economic battle.



This was, of course, the debate that some journalists tried to raise during the election campaign and that was studiously avoided by all the parties. Once again, official political discourse in the UK has failed us.

I suspect that come the next election no-one will care about the facts and figures. The reality of 'fairness' will be a very personal product of experience. But whichever party defines it most imaginatively in the next few years might just have the edge as we emerge blinking into the aftermath of all this sacrifice.

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This article first appeared on [Charlie Beckett's Blog](#) on 21 October.

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